

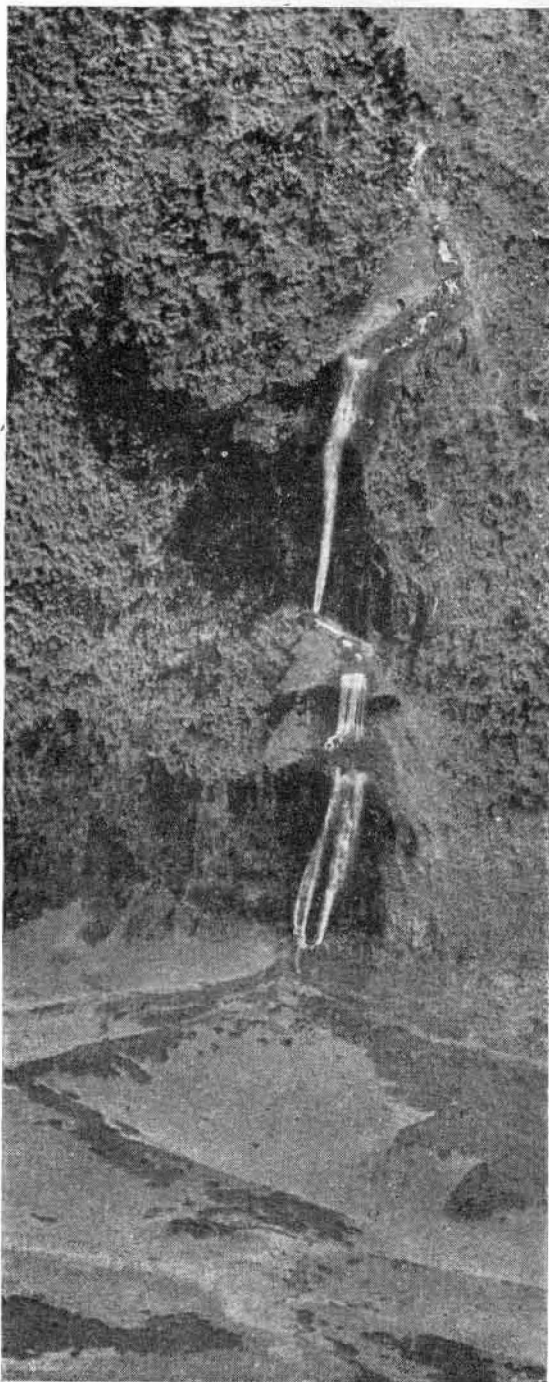
# The ABERDARE NATIONAL PARK

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This is the most recent of the Royal National Parks to be opened to the public. It was established in May, 1950, but has been in the grip of Mau Mau until quite recently. During the intensive campaign against the terrorists, I often wondered what was happening to the unfortunate wild animals which previously found sanctuary in the deep forests of the Aberdares.

Although there is evidence to show that poaching was fairly rife in these forest zones before the white man stepped in to protect them, the welter of deep forest and bamboo gave the animals a retreat into which even the wily poacher could not penetrate. It is perhaps incorrect to refer to the game pits which can still be found in many of these forest areas as the work of poachers, since in those early days there were no laws to make trapping illegal, and culling part of Nature's bounty by local inhabitants was a recognised practice. Had this great bounty of wild life not been so disastrously reduced all across East Africa, the activities of these hunters would probably not now constitute such a dangerous threat to the existence of our wild animals.

It is a miracle that the beasts of the forest both large and small, survived the dreadful disturbance of air raids, machine gun fire, and active warfare in the midst of their time-honoured stronghold. When permission was granted towards the end of last year to re-enter some of the closed Aberdare forest, we were relieved to find that although the animals had undoubtedly endured a frightful hammering, there were still many of the larger creatures to be seen. The extraordinary thing is that even at the height of the campaign wild animals were still using the Treetops salient.



*The Gura Falls—  
a glorious 1000 feet.*

*Photo J. B. Alexander*

I think it will be impossible to assess the extent or the results of the disturbance in these forest areas for some years ahead, as only then can we judge the effects on their breeding potential and any change in the factors which previously kept the game populations in balance with their habitats.

A particular act of vandalism was the destruction of the famous old "Treetops" when it was burnt by terrorists in 1954. This crooked, creaking Wendy-house perched in the branches of a large fig tree had a great tradition, and the Visitors Book contains the names of many famous people, not the least of which were H. R. H. The Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh on the night when H. M. King George VI passed from this world. After careful planning by Major Sherbrooke Walker, and after overcoming many difficulties a new "Treetops" was built near the site of the charred stump of the old fig tree with funds provided by the National Parks.

Africa has a strange ability for quickly reverting to type or to practice. People who now sit on the balcony of the new "Treetops" and watch all kinds of animals coming in to drink or take a lick of salt can hardly be aware of all the troubles of the last few years, not the least of which was the number of animals hunted and killed by the terrorists themselves and even by the Security Forces employed in the campaign.

The old Kikuyu name for the Kinangop is a word which means "the mountain with a skin" and it is a range that frequently nestles under a canopy of dense cloud and mist. Being on the lee-side of the prevailing winds which strike the frozen heights of Mount Kenya, the Aberdares almost have a climate of their own and storms originating on Mount Kenya frequently precipitate in the forests of the Aberdares.

The high moorland is one of the few places in a tropical belt which has all the appearance of a piece of Scotland or some other temperate zone. Rolling golden ridges covered in waving grass, broken by numerous river valleys and clumps of heath, give the impression of a different world, remote and elevated above the normal scene of thorn-bush Africa. Flowers of many kinds embellish this moorland scene and in their season the crimson gladioli outshine all the everlastings, wild violets, and numerous little plants that nestle in every glade.

Water trickles in almost every valley, converging to form tributaries of several streams which cascade over many waterfalls on their way down to the lower country. Well up in the moorland a lovely waterfall glistens like a diamond, and its white plumes of spray wave like ostrich feathers in the early morning sunshine. Trout, which were first imported by Colonel Grogan over 50 years ago, lurk in many of the pools and in course of time perhaps



Dept. of Information Photo.

H. M. Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, opens the road over the Aberdares.



*Dept. of Information Photo.*

wily anglers will be able to tempt these fish to take a fly skilfully flicked across the water.

It is therefore not surprising that Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother enjoyed this Scottish scene when she graciously consented to open the road over the high saddle of the range at an altitude of 10,508 ft. My anxiety was very great as rain and even hail below the Aberdares pointed to the cancellation of the Royal Visit. Even the day before there were various proposals that the great adventure should be abandoned as the risk of rain and muddy roads was far too great. Providence, however, ordained that on the morning of 16th February the road was reported dry, and the sun shone brilliantly on a shimmering scene of green and gold over a waving sea of moorland.

I had the privilege of driving Her Majesty up the steep western wall of the Aberdares, and pointing out the imposing panorama looking back over the Kinangop plateau down into the Rift Valley, broken by the silver streak of Lake Naivasha. At the highest point a tape was cut and the Queen Mother smilingly talked to those who were assembled to witness the

ceremony. A short drive across the moorland brought the Royal Party to the site chosen for a picnic lunch. A charming little summerhouse shielded Her Majesty from the brilliance of the sun, and we sat enjoying the splendid fare provided by the Outspan Hotel, and watching a crystal stream tumbling over a waterfall directly in front of the summerhouse.

Her Majesty was then driven down through the forest of the Kikuyu Reserve where the road was lined with thousands of enthusiastic Kikuyu waving and shouting a greeting to the Queen Mother. A visit to "Treetops" concluded the arrangements, and although no elephants paraded for Her Majesty, there were many other incidents of interest, not the least of which was a rhino that spent most of the afternoon and a good part of the night returning time and time again for another lick of salt with the usual attendant noises, immediately below the tree-house.

The Aberdare range is the home of many animals, some of which, like the graceful bongo, are seldom seen. A reliable observer, however, has recently reported having seen no less

than twenty-two bongo in what one must call a herd, coming out of the northern edge of the forest to reach a popular salt lick. Of the larger animals, elephant, rhino, and buffalo live in all sections of the forest and can quite often be seen well out in the open moorland. Eland, bushbuck, reedbuck, are also fairly common. Trees festooned with lichen camouflage the flying tresses of Colobus monkeys, and sometimes those who are very lucky see the occasional black leopard.

I remember some years ago watching a black leopard, glistening in the morning sunshine, silhouetted against the shining plumes of one

of the moorland waterfalls, and I doubt if I will ever see a more beautiful scene. I also remember, on another occasion, seeing lion footprints superimposed on fresh elephant footprints at over 12,000 feet. Perhaps these were the elusive spotted lions which the late Gandar Dower tried to find.

And the Aberdares, primarily a place of great scenic beauty, also has a remarkable display of rare vegetation and wild flowers, and will I hope one day rank high as an area of great faunal interest and a delight to those who wish to find a contrast from the harsh arid thorn bush of the low country.

