



going wild in

# SENEGAL

A desire to locate a relict population of western chimpanzees led **Stephen Cunliffe** and his team through plunging ravines and dense forests in Senegal's Niokolo-Koba National Park. Their target proved elusive, but the journey left everyone with renewed respect and admiration for this vast expanse of African wilderness. ▶

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE





ABOVE Washed-out bridges and steep-sided ravines could only be overcome with some skilled driving and the assistance of winches.

OPPOSITE Spur-winged geese and northern crowned cranes cluster around a shallow seasonal pan.

PREVIOUS PAGE The vivid blooms of the flamboyant have earned the tree its common name, flame of the forest.

Standing in a darkened customs office and enduring my first ever strip search, conducted by an overweight and overzealous border official with an unwavering conviction that our vehicle contained illicit drugs and smuggled weapons, was an inauspicious introduction to Senegal. After a thorough six-hour vetting at the country's border with Gambia, my four friends and I were reluctantly permitted to leave and took to our vehicles to start the day-long, bone-shattering drive through the Casamance region into south-eastern Senegal and the Niokolo-Koba National Park. It turned out to be just the first of many challenges we would face as we attempted to explore one of West Africa's premier national parks.

According to our map, we could access the park through a secondary gate at Missirah on its western boundary; however, the combination of a washed-out bridge and early seasonal rains had swelled the Koulountou River, blocking our path and thwarting any chance of entering the park via this route. So, after flushing a family of skittish warthogs and staring longingly across the river for an hour or so, we faced the only alternative – a nine-hour detour, with a night in Tambacounda, to the more commonly used northern entrance gate, Dar Salam.

We arrived the following morning and, after paying the park fees, finally entered Niokolo-Koba. Assigned to us was a mandatory park-approved guide,



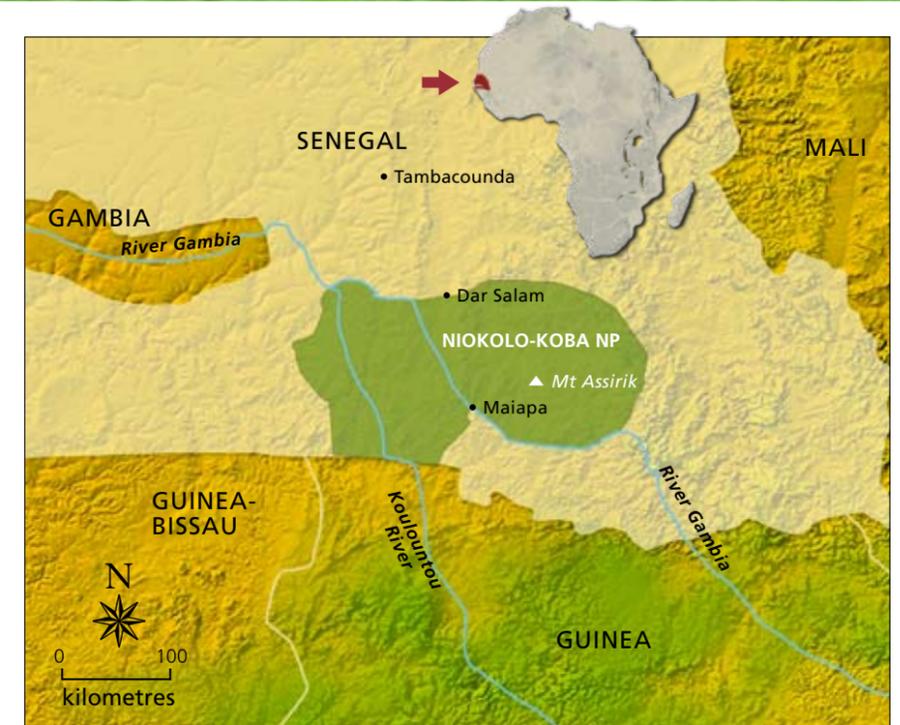
but as no English-speaking guides were available, it fell to French-speaking Ibrahim Kouyate, who had worked in the park for 14 years, to accompany us.

The Niokolo-Koba area was first proclaimed a hunting reserve in 1926. In 1951, it was upgraded in status to a forest reserve, then to a fauna reserve in 1953 and finally, in 1954, was gazetted as a national park. During the 1960s, the park was enlarged to its present core zone of 913 000 hectares, and 20 years later was awarded World Heritage Site status as an important biosphere reserve by UNESCO.

Niokolo-Koba is a flattish low-altitude park that varies between 16 and 311 metres (at the summit of Mount Assirik in the south-eastern section of the park) above sea level. Here, Cambrian sandstone beds are overlaid by wide floodplains and traversed by three major river systems. The perennial

River Gambia flows across the park's south-eastern boundary, then bisects it and exits via its western border. Offshoots of the Gambia are the Niokolo-Koba and the Koulountou rivers; together, the three waterways support 60 species of fish, and all three of Africa's crocodiles – the Nile, slender-snouted and dwarf – are present.

The vegetation is predominantly herbaceous savanna, interspersed with more complex riverine systems, although topographical changes and variations in soil characteristics throughout the park also support zones of dry forest, evergreen riverine forest and bamboo. To date, more than 1 500 plant species have been recorded, supporting an official list of 80 mammal species. However, many of these creatures are now considered to be critically threatened or locally extinct. There are also 36 reptile species, 20 amphibians and 330 types of birds, and visitors stand a decent chance of seeing Denham's ▶



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## A WORLD HERITAGE SITE IN DANGER

During a meeting in New Zealand on 26 June 2007, the World Heritage Committee inscribed Senegal's Niokolo-Koba National Park (along with the Galapagos Islands) on to UNESCO's List of World Heritage Sites in Danger. This listing aims to heighten public awareness and mobilise additional support for Niokolo-Koba's future protection and conservation.

However, despite its heritage status, Niokolo-Koba faces threats of rampant poaching, critically low mammal populations, ongoing management problems and the impacts of two proposed dams. Sharing an international border with Guinea, a country affected by civil unrest, is an added complication. The poaching and uncontrolled wild fires are undoubtedly attributable in part to the relocation of the local inhabitants to villages outside the park's boundaries during the 1970s, dramatically curtailing their ability to legally obtain natural resources from within it.

If they are built, the dams planned for a few kilometres upstream of the park on both the Niokolo-Koba and Gambia rivers would prevent the annual flooding of grasslands. This floodwater recharges seasonal pans and rejuvenates the floodplain savannas, crucial factors for sustaining extensive and viable wildlife populations.

**ABOVE** The view across Niokolo-Koba National Park from the summit of Mount Assirik. The forested slopes are home to a relict population of western chimpanzees, which managed to elude the author.

**RIGHT** In many places, the park roads were so overgrown with sickle bush that the only way to proceed was with exhaustingly slow manual labour, which meant that the team averaged a mere eight kilometres per hour for three days.

**OPPOSITE** A northern ground-hornbill. Despite threats by poachers and ongoing management problems, Senegal's flagship national park is still home to prolific birdlife.



bustard, northern ground-hornbill, black crowned crane, huge flocks of spur-winged geese and plentiful palm-nut vultures.

Lions feature on the mammal list but, according to the guides and local staff, they are seldom seen, and you're far more likely to see African wild dog or even leopard. Side-striped jackals and spotted hyaenas are the only plentiful predators that remain. Many of the larger herbivore populations, such as elephant and giraffe, hover on the brink of local extinction owing to heavy poaching, although hippos seem to have escaped persecution and are common in all the major river systems. There are also roan antelope, Lord Derby eland (Africa's largest antelope), as well as the more frequently observed shaggy-coated Defassa waterbuck, timid bushbuck and abundant herds of kob, warthog, Guinea baboon and green monkey (a relative of the vervet).

Less commonly seen primates include the patas monkey, endangered bay colobus (subspecies of the red colobus) and a relict population of the western chimpanzee. An estimated 150 chimps inhabit the gallery forest on Mount Assirik, which forms the north-westerly limit to their distribution, and it was these primates that were the focus of our expedition.

**A**fter camping in the bush at Camp du Lion for two days with wildlife scouts, we headed to Simenti, where we were permitted to camp in the grounds of the park's only hotel for a few nights. The area around

Simenti, with its hides and airstrip, is the most-visited sector of Niokolo-Koba, and offers the best game-viewing opportunities. Despite this, our week-long visit in July revealed only two other vehicles. Part of the reason for this may have been that although the map of the park indicated a mesh of game-viewing roads, it painted a woefully inaccurate picture of current conditions. Most of the river crossings could only be forded during the height of the dry season, and flooding in previous years had washed out a number of bridges, which, because of a lack of funds, had never been repaired.

We decided not to follow the doctrine that 'it can't be done' and proceeded to embark on an ambitious east-west traverse of the park. The plan was to head eastwards from Simenti before taking a dog-leg route south to Maiapa and then swinging back east again, via Mount Assirik and the chimps, to the Niokolo-Koba guard post. Here, we could rejoin the tarred N7 and exit the park. Our proposed route was an old road that had not been driven for three years because a bridge over a steep-sided ravine on the journey had been washed away in a flash flood. Too enthusiastic to be daunted, we even managed to convince Ibrahima (who by now had succumbed with good grace to his affectionate nickname, 'Fromage') to sanction the 120-kilometre adventure across the park.

Arriving at the ravine, our first challenge was to find a route down its slope, across the riverbed, then out the other side of the gorge and back onto the road. It took some quality driving and a little winching, but we managed to get across more easily than expected, and headed into the uncharted territory. Sections of the road were in near-pristine condition, but a complete lack of maintenance meant that in other areas it was completely overgrown with sickle bush. Regular stops had to be made to clear the path with machetes and axes. It was slow going and brutally hard work in the relentless heat and humidity, and we averaged just five kilometres per hour.

Once we'd left the Simenti section of the park, wildlife became exceedingly scarce. Bullet casings and shotgun cartridges lying on the road bore witness to the challenges that face it (see 'A World Heritage Site in Danger'). However, the lack of large wildlife was compensated for by the sense of true



Bullet casings and shotgun cartridges lying on the road bore witness to the challenges that face [the park]

African wilderness, the rich birdlife and, at night, the nocturnal creatures that visited our camp beneath the star-studded night sky.

In total, the 120-kilometre-long journey took us three full days to complete, and would have taken considerably longer without the advice and guidance of Ibrahima. By the end of day three, as we reached Mount Assirik, our team was shattered and too tired to contemplate making the long trek in search of chimpanzees. In fact, despite searching for them the following day, our closest living relatives managed to elude us. We gained an immense respect for this untamed wilderness, though, and I hope to return to find the chimps that constantly beckon and tempt me back to Niokolo-Koba. ■