

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

An unexpected AWAKENING



Kidepo Valley National Park in north-eastern Uganda does not enjoy a reputation for wildlife-viewing or ecotourism. Tainted by its proximity to southern Sudan and the infamous Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the park has been all but ignored. But, with the retreat of the LRA, peace is returning to this turbulent region and, as **Stephen Cunliffe** discovered, those intrepid enough to visit Kidepo will be amply rewarded. ▶





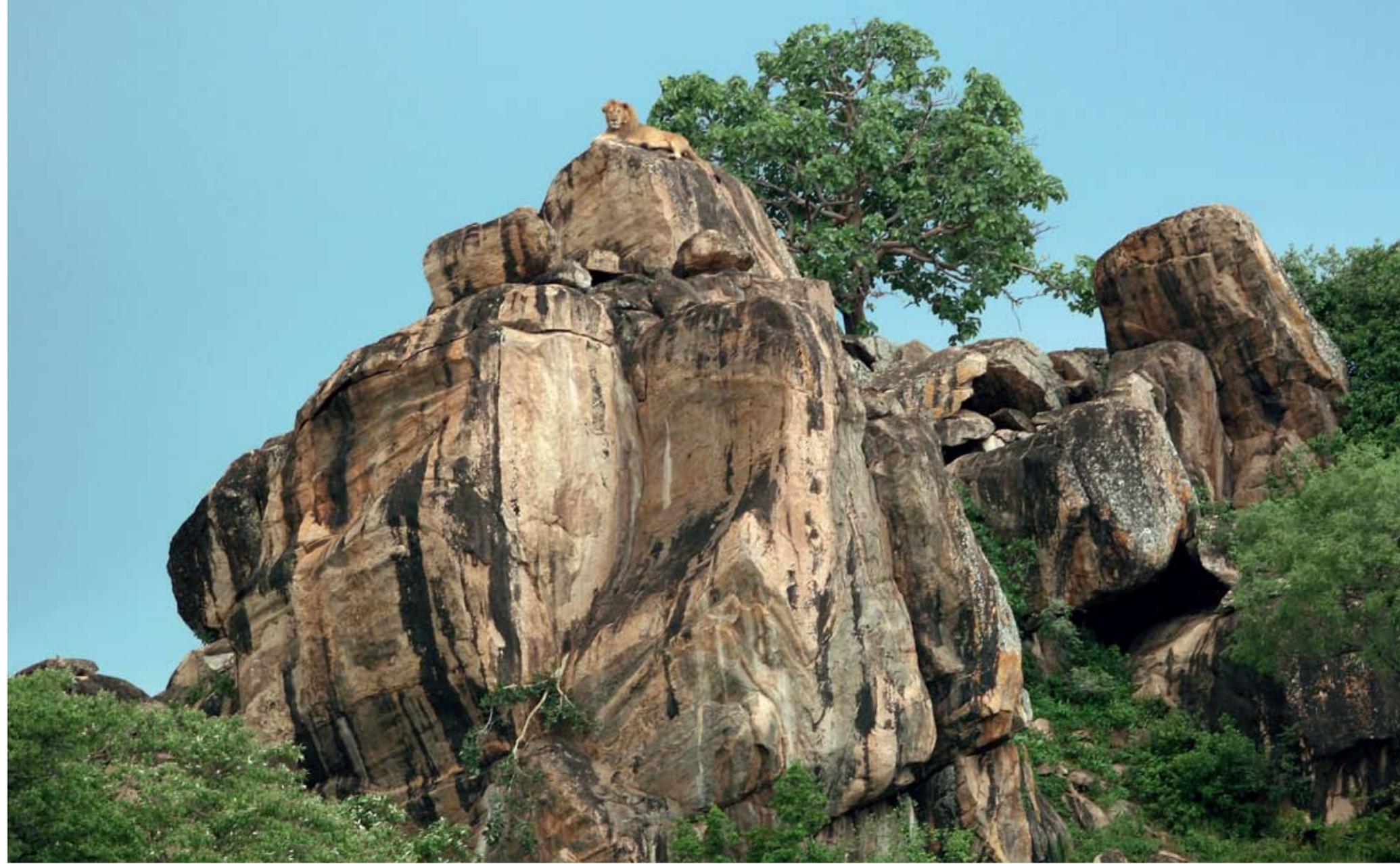
PREVIOUS SPREAD, MAIN PHOTOGRAPH
A recently burnt section of the Narus Valley turns green after the arrival of the rains. The fresh grazing attracts Jackson's hartebeest and plains zebra.

INSETS, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT An inquisitive Guenther's dik-dik in the arid Kidepo Valley; a usually well-camouflaged chameleon is revealed; the ephemeral Kidepo River flows strongly as the rainy season ends.

The morning calm was shattered by a deafening roar that was at odds with the remote wilderness. The unmistakable whirl of helicopter rotors drowned out the dawn chorus and the alarm calls of oribi, which skipped away with their characteristic rocking-horse gait. Two Ugandan People's Defence Force helicopters appeared, flying low above the ground. Their targets? Kraals on the southern slopes of Mount Morungole. Their task? To confiscate weapons from nomadic Karamajong cattle herders, part of the government's controversial decision to disarm the inhabitants of this wild land.

Welcome to the Kidepo Valley National Park in Karamoja, a district in north-eastern Uganda not known for its wildlife viewing and ecotourism. Kidepo lies to the west of Kenya's Turkana region and its northern boundary forms part of the international border with southern Sudan. For most people, however, the area is synonymous with the infamous Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), but they may be surprised to learn that the LRA did not operate in northern Karamoja and has never entered the national park. It was the people of Acholiland to the west of Kidepo who bore the brunt of the LRA and the heavily armed Karamajong who kept it out of north-eastern Uganda.

There is no disputing that Kidepo has a rough bunch of neighbours, but with the retreat of the insurgents to the DRC and the disarmament of the local



Karamajong 'warriors', the park is slowly opening up to adventurous travellers looking for an Africa that is untamed and undiscovered by the mass safari market. In the 18 months that I called the national park home, the above incident was the total extent of the insecurity that we experienced. Anyone wishing to drive there should definitely enquire as to the situation *en route*, but within the park's boundaries we did not feel threatened.

The park's 1 442 square kilometres comprise the rugged, semi-arid Kidepo and more well-watered Narus river systems. Both rivers flow roughly north and parallel to each other before converging in the Sudan and, ultimately, draining into the Nile. The area is officially classified as semi-desert,

but the park has experienced above average rainfall for most of the past decade. Its landscape is best described as open savannas of long and short grasses, reminiscent of Kenya's Masai Mara, interspersed with borassus palms and sausage trees. The savanna is broken up further by a sprinkling of rocky granite outcrops or koppies. To the west, it gives way completely to the Napore-Nyagia Hills and, in the east, the two valleys are separated by the Lokayot and Natira hills. The park's altitude ranges widely from 914 metres in the Narus Valley to 2 750 metres at the peak of Mount Morungole, on its south-eastern boundary.

The Kidepo is an ephemeral river, prone to flash flooding, that drains through an arid valley characterised by acacia savanna and outstanding birding.

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Ostrich, Clapperton's francolin, yellow-necked spurfowl, white-headed buffalo-weaver, steel-blue whydah and rose-ringed parakeet (the only parakeet found in Africa) are just a few of the 475 bird species recorded within the Kidepo catchment area. For serious birders, big ticks include the Karamoja apalis, Jackson's hornbill and black-breasted barbet.

In terms of wildlife, the Kidepo valley has been hard hit by poaching over

ABOVE The dominant male lion of the southern Narus pride surveys his domain from a favoured rocky outcrop.

OPPOSITE The view over the Narus Valley, looking north towards Sudan.





This abundant water, together with quality grazing and a visible anti-poaching effort, have combined to create an area where wildlife numbers are increasing



the years. As recently as 2006, cattle herders from the Dodoth, Dinka and Taposa tribes used this area to water and graze their livestock during the dry season. The Ugandan government has since prohibited these predominantly Sudanese people from occupying the park, but their long-term presence has undoubtedly hastened the demise of wildlife in the area.

The only antelope that remains abundant is the diminutive Guenther's dik-dik. The population of Jackson's hartebeest is increasing, but the lesser kudu is on the brink of local extinction, and Grant's gazelle, beisa oryx, greater kudu and roan antelope have disappeared entirely from the national park. The last black rhino is believed to have been shot as far back as 1984 and there have been no sightings of striped hyaenas or African wild dogs for the past three years.

However, the wildlife picture is not quite as bleak as it sounds. The Ugandan Wildlife Authority (UWA), which manages the park and conducts anti-poaching efforts, has

concentrated the majority of its resources on the Narus River valley, with clear and visible success. The Narus holds water all year round and several of its large tributaries have perennial springs at the base of the surrounding hills. This abundant water, together with quality grazing and a visible anti-poaching effort, have combined to create an area where wildlife numbers are increasing. The last comprehensive mammal survey conducted in the park was back in 1971, when 86 mammal species, including bats and rodents, were recorded. From 2006 to 2007, we recorded 43 mammal species, an excellent count considering that bats were excluded.

Oribis are the most plentiful antelope in the Narus valley, but there are also healthy populations of defassa waterbuck, Jackson's hartebeest, common duiker, bushbuck and Bohor reedbuck. Eland were believed to be locally extinct until a handful of sightings were recorded in 2004. The following year, a group of eland was re-introduced to a holding boma from Lake Mburo National Park. Rothschild's giraffes were

heavily hunted and reduced to a paltry three individuals, but the population has also been augmented by re-introductions from Kenya. Both these populations are showing good growth, with a number of youngsters and sub-adults rapidly approaching sexual maturity.

The plains zebra is currently the only mammal showing a dramatic and consistent decline. This is being attributed to the equine disease, laminitis, an inflammation of the sensitive laminae or tissues that connect the hooves to the bone. Research is currently underway to determine whether this is the sole cause of the population crash.

Predators are well represented and regularly seen within this section of Kidepo. Side-striped jackals are the most prolific carnivore, while their less frequently observed black-backed cousins inhabit the drier areas. Spotted hyaenas are seen (and, more regularly, heard) and leopards, though shy, leave telltale tracks across the dry riverbeds. The drag marks they create reveal ▶

ABOVE A buffalo herd kicks up dust during the dry month of January as it makes its way to a perennial waterpoint on the Narus River.

TOP Kidepo is the only national park in Uganda where cheetahs are found. These cats regularly use firebreaks to track and chase oribi, their preferred prey.

ABOVE, LEFT The white-browed coucal is one of three coucal species frequently seen here.

OPPOSITE, TOP After gorging themselves on a buffalo carcass, these lionesses climbed a sausage tree to escape the biting flies and enjoy a cool breeze.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM A male defassa waterbuck joins a herd of plains zebra, taking advantage of both the fresh green grass and the safety of numbers.



Apoka Safari Lodge offers the only luxury accommodation in Kidepo.

INFOTRAVEL

It is highly recommended that visitors fly to the park due to the risk of banditry along the roads. Further information on air charters can be obtained from the Kampala Aeroclub and Flight Centre on tel. (+256-75) 690 173 or fax (+256-41) 223 680.

Self-drive visitors are urged to contact Ugandan Wildlife Authority (UWA) headquarters in Kampala on tel. (+256-41) 346 287 or via e-mail uwa@uwa.or.ug to obtain the latest information regarding the condition and security situation of the route.

No fuel is available in the reserve. The nearest petrol stations are located in the towns of Kaabong and Kitgum, 90 and 130 kilometres away respectively.

The recently rebuilt Apoka Safari Lodge offers luxury accommodation in 10 thatched and canvas chalets. The camp offers fully inclusive fly-in packages with private open-top safari vehicles and daily bush walks. The camp is open all year. More information is available at www.safariuganda.com/apoka_lodge.html and www.wildplaces.com

The UWA also offers two rustic bush campsites and basic self-catering *bandas* (rondavels). Although it remains open throughout the year, the best time to visit the national park is during the long dry season from December to early March.

For more (if slightly dated) information, visit the UWA website www.uwa.org or go to www.kidepo.html

For assistance in planning a trip to Kidepo Valley National Park or any other Ugandan destination, contact Africa Geographic Travel on tel. (+27-21) 762 2180, e-mail info@africageographic.com or visit www.africageographictravel.com



that Bohor reedbuck, oribi, common duiker and tatalus monkeys are their preferred food.

Servals and caracals are here too, but are equally secretive. Kidepo is, however, the only national park in Uganda where you can see cheetahs. The open savannas dotted with termite mounds and rocky outcrops are ideal habitat for them to stalk their favoured prey, oribi.

There is also a healthy lion population, estimated to be between 44 and 50 individuals, belonging to at least three prides within the Narus valley. These cats frequently climb sausage trees along the drainage lines and also make use of the steep koppies that form part of this dramatic landscape. The elevations allow them to take advantage of cooling breezes and escape the ticks and biting flies below. During the rainy season, when the grass is tall, they also provide the best lookouts for spotting potential prey.

Elephants are the most migratory of all the mammal species in Kidepo. Small breeding herds and bachelor groups of mature bulls regularly cross into Sudan and east into Kenya. Some are lost to a hail of automatic gunfire, but many adapt their behaviour and survive to return to the park the following dry season. When the first rains fall in March, these family units congregate to take advantage of the abundant fresh green grass along the

Narus River and herds can swell into the hundreds.

In the dry season, buffaloes focus on the last pools of water within the Narus catchment area and, between December and March, it is not uncommon to see herds numbering in excess of 1 000 animals. While it is truly magical to witness such huge quantities of wildlife in such breathtaking scenery, the real privilege is that there is not another tourist for 500 kilometres.

Uganda may be famous for its primates, but Kidepo, to put it bluntly, is not. Its predominantly dry savannas are not conducive to a large variety of species and commonly seen primates are limited to tatalus and patas monkeys (the latter are related to the forest-dwelling guenons, but are adapted for running across savanna grasslands) as well as olive baboons. All three species of ant- and termite-eaters have been recorded here, although the pangolin is regarded as extremely rare. I was fortunate to enjoy sightings of both aardwolf and aardvark.

For keen hikers and culturally minded visitors, there is the prospect of a trip to the Ik on the upper reaches of Mount Morungole. The Ik are members of a marginalised hill tribe that survive on subsistence agriculture and, to a large extent, have no concept of money. The few



necessities that they require, and cannot grow themselves, are obtained by bartering with the Karamajong settlements below. They live in small cluster villages surrounded by an outer wall of tightly interwoven branches that have tiny openings through which to crawl. Visitors here are few and far between.

We were privileged to make such a journey at the start of the 2006 dry season. Etiquette demanded that we sought out the headman first, giving him gifts, such as a goat, a bag of salt or a farming implement. The colour of our skin provoked hysterical screaming from the young children, who hadn't seen white people before. They were reassured by the older children and scolded by the adults until curiosity took over and we became the centre of attention.

In return for our gifts, we were invited to camp next to their village for the night and share in the feast of roasted goat and *posho* (a maize porridge also known as *ugali*). This wasn't all we shared – village life doesn't afford much privacy and when nature calls (as it did), you could be sure that a small army of inquisitive children would join you to witness the deed!

The following morning, two young men (later joined by three friends) were assigned to act as our guides in reaching the summit of Mount Morungole. The terrain was not too difficult, but there

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was no clear pathway. The top of the mountain was regarded as a spiritual place and our guides were terrified at the thought of entering the domain of the gods.

'When was it last climbed?' The headman pondered my question for some time. He seemed to remember an Italian hiker who had visited the area about 15 years ago. The realisation that no one had reached the 2 750-metre summit since then seemed incredible, but served to drive home just how remote this part of Africa really is.

When we finally made it to the top, there were views north towards the Lotukei mountains (made famous by the 2005 plane crash in which Sudanese vice-president John Garang died), to the east lay the town of Lokichokio in Kenya and all the wilderness that is Kidepo stretched out below us. As we walked back through the Ik villages towards the national park, our young guides walked tall. They had braved the place of their ancestors and survived. ■

ABOVE A typical hilltop village belonging to the Ik people, encountered *en route* to the summit of Mount Morungole.

OPPOSITE Piapiacs are members of the crow family. They regularly hitch rides on elephants, which disturb grasshoppers and other insect fare.