

widespread species. For example, the undoubtedly ubiquitous Black-eyed Bulbul *Pycnonotus barbatus* is recorded only from some 20 of the 180 squares in the references covered by *Birds of Malawi*. Although we may assume that this bulbul will be found in every square, it would be dangerous to make this assumption for the many species less catholic, whose preferred habitat may be endangered locally.

We would stress that the success of this worthwhile project depends upon the active field work of as many observers as possible. We hope that those of you interested in helping will contact us for further information. It is intended that there will be a companion atlas of the mammals of Malawi. Details will be published later, but meanwhile please make a note of all mammals you see (or identify satisfactorily by spoor) while visiting atlas squares.

References

- Benson, C.W. (1953) *A Check List of the Birds of Nyasaland* Nyasaland Society and Joint Publications Bureau, Blantyre and Lusaka.
- Benson, C.W. and Benson, F.M. (1977) *The Birds of Malawi*. Montfort Press, Limbe, Malawi.
- Dowsett, R.J. and Dowsett-Lemaire, F. (1979) The Mountain Buzzard, *Buteo tachardus*, in Central Africa. *Scopus* 3: 14 - 18.
- Hanmer, D.B. (1979) An undescribed subspecies of Rudd's Apalis *Apalis ruddi* from southern Malawi. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* 99: 27 - 28.

FIFTH PAN-AFRICAN ORNITHOLOGICAL CONGRESS

VENUE: LILONGWE, MALAWI

DATE: 23 - 30 AUGUST 1980

THEME: CURRENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE OF AFRICAN BIRDS
(with pointers to future research).

EXCURSIONS: Pre- and post-Congress excursions to indigenous forests, mountain areas, lake shore, Game Parks and Nature Reserves offering a variety of habitat with ornithological interest within Malawi.

REGISTRATION FEE, APPLICATION FORMS AND BROCHURE: Malawian residents please contact

Mr. J.H. Ryder
Treasurer
5th Pan-African Ornithological Congress
P.O. Box 30300
Lilongwe 3
Malawi

NYALA 5(2) Dec 1979

IN QUEST OF RHINO

by

B. Liggit

University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

From my camp at night I could just make out in the distance the sooty black hills that border Mwabvi Game Reserve, a wilderness that few people have ever heard of, let alone visited. I knew that somewhere, in all the bush that surrounded me, were Mwabvi's rhino, the last remaining black rhinoceros population in the southern region of Malawi. Somewhere, but where? I had spent more than a week in the reserve but the rhino had remained frustratingly unco-operative.

Yes, I knew they were there, I had found fresh tracks and dung, but the timid animals were elusive, secretive and didn't drink at the waterholes as expected. Right from the "early days" the rhino in Mwabvi have been renowned for their shyness and the small population, probably less than ten individuals, has not appeared to increase during their thirty years of protection.

That was why I had come to Mwabvi in the first place. I felt that if I could make an estimate of the number of rhino present it could help in monitoring the population.

Throughout their range in Africa black rhinos have decreased alarmingly, especially during the last ten years. The human population growth and development which is taking place coupled with an increasing demand for rhino horn has led to their extermination in large areas.

Kenya and Tanzania, once the strongholds of black rhino, are now undertaking stringent measures to try and protect their survivors. However the black rhinos' inability to cope with human interference or disturbance and the high value of their horns causes grave doubts about their survival in most of Africa.

Once it was the white rhinoceros that headed the list of endangered African species. Today it is sadly the turn of the black rhinoceros.

It was my love and concern for these 'prehistoric monsters' that had led me to take an interest in their survival in Malawi. I feel it would be a tragedy if Malawi were to lose so rare and precious a creature. Thus, the status of rhino in Mwabvi, specifically created for the protection of rhino in the first place, is of immediate concern to me.

I think it is important to monitor the population, especially since it is so small. Many factors, in particular an unfavourable age or sex ratio, could lead to the population losing its viability.

I intended to estimate the number of rhino present in Mwabvi using spoor counts made around the waterholes. I hoped to visit as many of the waterholes frequented by the rhino as possible, and to individually recognise the rhino from their tracks. I felt that this would be possible due to the low number of rhino involved and variations in the size and location of the spoor.

Once in the reserve my hopes were rapidly crushed. Unfortunately it had rained not long before my visit and water, mainly in the form of rock pools, was widely distributed throughout the reserve. Consequently the rhino did not have to travel to the permanent waterholes to drink and, preferring to stay hidden in the "thickets", provided me with very little in the way of fresh spoor.

At first I considered the alternative of counting rhino spoor away from the waterholes. But, a walk into Malema "thicket" really just a dry woodland, quickly dispelled any further thoughts on the matter. The ground was sun-baked hard and for the most part covered with a layer of leaf litter. One would have to be an expert tracker, which I'm not, to discover any tracks, let alone identify them as belonging to a particular rhino.

I suppose I might have tried searching for fresh rhino dung or middens but it would have been largely a matter of luck whether I found any or not. It seemed a rather unsatisfactory method of calculating the population - relying on chance for my data!

It was inevitable, then, that I had to give up the idea of a rhino count. Realising that there was little more useful work I could achieve in the limited time I had available I made the painful decision to leave Mwabvi. Painful, not only because I felt that I had not achieved what I had set out to do, but because I had been struck by the charm of this little reserve with so much character.

How often can one eat breakfast under the inquisitive eyes of a troupe of blue monkeys or baboons, as I did at Mwabvi? How often, in our concrete jungles, do we have a honeyguide coming to us, trying to persuade us to follow?

Yes, Mwabvi captured all the magic and enchantment of the African wilds.

During my stay I got to know and individually recognise some of the animals living around the camp.

There was the bushbaby which lived in the trees adjacent to the camp, regularly shattering the peace of the night with its screams. It appeared quite unaffected by me, even when I shone the torch on it and one night it even went so far as to make a thorough search of my pots and pans, right under my nose!

Behind the camp a large sandstone ridge provided an ideal refuge for a colony of yellow-spotted dassies. Although they were surprisingly tame during the day I was amazed to see them at night when they took little or no notice of me. I could walk up

to them, torch trained on them and they would continue their nocturnal activities unabated. They just didn't seem to realise that I was potentially dangerous, but it meant that I was able to study them at close quarters.

For most of the time they lay drowsily under rocks or crept through the trees. I was surprised to see how easily they took to arboreal life, making their way along the twigs and branches with ease.

One night I heard a great commotion and, training my light on the noise, I found that it was two half grown dassies squabbling for a suckle from their mother. They eventually resolved their dispute by each seizing a teat, after which there was a long, contented silence, punctuated occasionally by loud sucking noises.

My attention was diverted from this little family group by another juvenile which bounded along the rock towards me, quite unperturbed by my crouched form or the light from my torch. I could hardly believe my eyes as it came steadily closer, eventually stopping just a few centimetres from my boot. There it sat with twitching wet nose and whiskers and large black eyes. I could quite easily have picked it up but I was so fascinated by this delightful creature that I felt it would be a shame to give it the fright of its life.

Later on I just couldn't resist the temptation to stroke one as it lay on the rock just below me. For several seconds it dozed on as I ran my fingers through its beautiful soft fur, then suddenly it smelled me and with a shrill squeak it raced down the rock followed by the rest of the colony. That was the last of the dassies I saw that night.

Walking through the dark woodland at night was quite exciting and even the slightest rustle in the leaves would leave my nerves on edge although I found, as time went on, that I was able to recognise certain sounds.

The elephant shrews would give themselves away with a characteristic double tap on the leaves. I was never able to actually see them make this sound. Whenever I was able to stalk close to them they would sit, as if petrified, for a couple of seconds before scampering off into the night.

Sometimes on my nocturnal walks I was startled by a fight breaking out between two animals as they hissed and snorted savagely and chased each other through the thicket. Despite my efforts I was unable to even catch a glimpse of these animals but I suspect that they were small carnivores - probably genets or mongooses.

During the day life was equally interesting although my walks were probably not quite so nerve tingling as at night.

A pair of suni lived in the thicket just a few metres from my camp and consequently I was able to spend a lot of time with these tiny antelope, scarcely larger than a hare.

I fear that the male didn't quite approve of my venturing into his domain on hands and knees. He would stand motionless as I approached, watching me with his large bright eyes and every so often, just letting me know what he thought, by uttering his wheezy snort.

The female was not as concerned and would start feeding after a few minutes, daintily picking up fallen leaves from the ground.

When I approached them too closely, both suni would snort and dash off through the undergrowth, leaving me feeling guilty at having disturbed them.

Suni have so many enemies it is amazing that they manage to survive. They are so small that they are preyed on by a range of carnivores, from leopards to eagles. No doubt this is why they remain hidden in the thickets, secretive and cautious. Whenever I used to see the pair of crowned eagles displaying over the camp I would think of the little suni and understand why they seemed perpetually nervous.

One of my favourite walks, after I had returned from a hard morning of slogging through the bush in search of rhino, was to make my way to Fodya waterhole, not far from the camp. The path to the waterhole was a beautiful one, passing some weather-beaten old baobabs before winding through a fascinating woodland with its dry, gnarled trees and short grazed grass.

The path came out of the woodland onto a huge slab of sandstone which descended into a gorge filled with a mixture of riverine trees and dry thicket.

Usually my arrival at the waterhole was greeted by the loud flapping of wings and noisy wailing as a flock of trumpeter hornbills left their meal of figs and ungracefully crash-landed into nearby trees.

Sometimes a blue monkey would boom at the disturbance as I made my way down to the water. The thicket would become alive with sound as fleeing animals crashed their way through the undergrowth. Try as I might, I was seldom able to catch even a glimpse of them, hidden as they were by the vegetation.

A large boulder, on which grew a fine rock-splitting fig, overlooked the trickle of water and provided me with a favourite hide-out. From there I used to sit and watch the waterhole come back to life after my disturbance.

It was always the birds which returned first - paradise flycatchers, bulbuls, shrikes, white-eyes and delightful Livingstone's flycatchers, followed by the noisy trumpeter hornbills. Then the dassies would start popping out of their holes in the rocks and sun themselves, frequently shaking their heads,

irritated by the relentless mopane bees. Even for me there was no escaping the little tormentors and it was as much as I could do to remain silent and inconspicuous as the tiny bees crawled into my eyes and buzzed round my ears. Then, in the drowsy heat, I would begin to wonder whether it was worth putting up with all the discomfort until a sudden rustling in the thicket below me would herald an animal's approach. No thought of mopane bees or heat now!

My eyes would search the undergrowth for a tell tale movement, giving away the presence of an animal. Usually it was Livingstone's suni, bushbuck, warthog or mongoose. But, if I was lucky I might see a nyala as it cautiously crept down to the water.

I saw my first Meller's mongoose at Fodya and was struck by its large size and bushy black tail. On another occasion I was fortunate enough to have a good view of a chequered elephant shrew as it nosed its way through the leaf litter with its remarkably long snout.

Not only were the animals and birds interesting but the vegetation was too. Around the waterhole grew a variety of fig trees from the mighty sycamore figs to the rock splitters and strangler figs. Their fruit attracted numerous birds and, no doubt, at night the fruit bats as well.

Fodya appeared to mark the transition from one vegetation zone to another. On the sandstone area on the one side very few trees grew except for some beautiful *Brachystegia*. Here there was little or no undergrowth and hardly any grass. The very shallow soil may have been responsible for this. Some trees seemed to be growing on a layer of leaf mould only a few centimetres thick.

Several aloe species have colonised the rocks. One striking species took advantage of the dassies' middens and, despite the otherwise inhospitable surroundings, appeared to thrive. They had large, dark glossy green leaves and occasionally I came across flowering specimens, their large red spikes conspicuous from a distance.

Below the rocky ridge the vegetation was markedly different. For the most part it consisted of tall, thick grass with trees scattered about in clumps or singly. These included huge pod mahoganies, majestic even without their leaves and baobabs with purple bark covering their outsized trunks.

One baobab always seemed to be occupied by a pair of raucous brown-necked parrots. Although the tree seemed to have some inviting nesting holes I never saw the birds entering one. They were rather shy and I was seldom able to approach closely without them flying off, screeching and screaming.

Fairly extensive areas of mopane woodland exist in Mwabvi and I frequently had to walk through it on my visits to the waterholes. Pure mopane woodland is really beautiful with its tall, well formed trees but I was usually only able to appreciate

it in the early morning. Towards midday the mopanes hang their leaves vertically, providing precious little shade from the fierce tropical sun. In addition, the mopane bees and tsetse flies made me uncomfortably aware of themselves. Admittedly they were more noticeable by their buzzing than their biting and, until they got really bad, I was able to disregard them.

One walk which particularly stands out in my mind was when the game scouts took me to the top of Nyantoko Hill. Near the base of this huge mound of sandstone I was delighted to come across a small group of Nyasa klipspringer which looked at us with curiosity before bounding away over the rocks, as if on springs. They were pretty little animals, bright russet on the forequarters with white facial markings round nose and eyes. Their hindquarters were the grey of ordinary klipspringers.

From the summit of Nyantoko there was a tremendous view. In every direction lay a carpet of grey-green bush, little spoiled by the hand of man. What a tonic it was to behold this timeless view, unchanged for centuries!

Below lay Nyantoko thicket, a dense grey mat and to the south the tremendous Zambezi Valley stretched to the horizon.

During my daily visits to the waterholes I passed through kilometres of fascinating country and my only regret was that the scouts walked so quickly, but then we had a lot of ground to cover.

North of camp the *Braehystegia* woodland tended to be rather sparse in animal and bird life but towards the Donde river the country opened up. In some areas the grass had been burned, much to the delight of the warthogs and duiker.

For the most part the Donde River was as dry as a bone, although a narrow trickle of water flowed through the riverine trees for a few hundred metres, providing a watering site for the animals. Although I could only find old rhino spoor, in the sand, one day I was quite excited to find the fresh tracks of a lion where it had walked for some distance down the sandy riverbed.

Predators appeared to be widespread in Mwabvi, judging from their spoor. During my stay in the reserve I saw fresh tracks of lion, leopard, hyena and many smaller carnivores. I was particularly interested to find evidence of wild dogs (cape hunting dogs) since they were believed to have become extinct in the Southern Region of Malawi until a few years ago. Not only did I find their tracks (at Njuli waterhole), but we came across a reasonably fresh carcass of an adult male kudu which the scouts thought had been killed by wild dogs. Certainly it seemed possible for the kudu was not old judging from the small amount of wear on the teeth.

Kudu appear to be distributed throughout Mwabvi for not only did I see them on many of my walks but their tracks and dung were evident in virtually all vegetation types. Sable tracks, too, were fairly abundant but try as I might, I was unable to catch even a glimpse of these magnificent antelope.

I think part of the difficulty of trying to find sable was that I walked everywhere I went and doubtless the animals, if they were around, would sense me from a long way off. The few motor tracks that there are in Mwabvi are very poor, a Landrover follows them at slightly more than walking pace hence my travelling on foot.

The evenings were probably the most enjoyable part of the day. After the heat, tsetse and mopane bees it was such a relief to be rid of them. The sun would slowly sink behind the trees, casting a lovely pink light on the distant hills and as dusk approached the nightjars would flit from their posts, hawking insects, and the nocturnal creatures would leave their daytime hideouts. Then, as the stars began to cast their pinpricks of light, the melancholy whoop of a hyena would herald the start of the night.

* * * * *

It was my last night in Mwabvi. The embers of my fire glowed faintly as I sat in the dark, listening to the rustling in the bush and pondering over my stay in the wilds. I knew that somewhere, in all the bush that surrounded me, were Mwabvi's rhino. Suddenly a bushbaby shattered the peace and tranquillity with its unearthly shrieks, wailing like a tormented child, and far down the valley I could hear the harsh, sawing cry of a leopard on the prowl.

I had enjoyed my time in Mwabvi with its unspoiled magic and beauty. As for the rhinos, well, they had managed to keep their secrets to themselves and I can only hope that these magnificent old thorn-crushers survive to puzzle and delight Mankind for many generations more.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give special thanks to Mr. A. Khombe and Mr. G.D. Hayes, both of whom went out of their way to ensure that my trip was possible. I also want to thank the game scouts and camp staff at Mwabvi who enabled me to enjoy my stay so much.