

# KAGERA-Cinderella of Africa's parks

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WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRUCE KINLOCH

*Established more than 30 years ago, through an accident of politics, Rwanda's Kagera National Park is, for probably the same reason, lagging behind the fine parks of East Africa. But it is without doubt one of the finest game parks in Africa and would amply repay even a small investment in the form of tourist-oriented development. Even now it is well worth a visit*

THE whole hillside on my right appeared to be moving as I turned my Land-Rover down the sandy track towards the gleaming, serpentine curls of the Kagera River, which was shining like burnished copper in the slanting rays of the evening sun. The hill was silhouetted against the evening light and covered by a thin scattering of stunted, flat-topped thorn trees, interspersed by small thickets of dense bush and tangled patches of long, rank grass. All this lay in a steadily widening pool of deep shadow in which the bushes seemed to be appearing and disappearing, grouping and re-grouping like some haunted wood at Hallowe'en.

I swung the Land-Rover off the track and reached for my binoculars. Seeing my puzzled expression my silent companion stirred, a broad grin splitting his normally impassive, chocolate-brown face to reveal an alarming row of sharply-pointed, filed teeth, like the mouth of a benevolent tiger-shark. With his left hand he adjusted the tall, olive-green fez on his dusty, sweat-streaked forehead, while with his right he waved airily towards the nearby slopes.

'Les buffles' boomed Sergeant Ngoboka. 'Beaucoup des buffles!' 'B-i-f-f-a-l-o-s', he added slowly as a kindly after-thought, in the courteous but mistaken conviction that his command of English was far superior to my rudimentary grasp of his Rwandaise French. I hastily assured him in French, English, and Kiswahili that I had understood, but it was too late: as the Kagera National Park Guard's parade-ground voice echoed from the hillsides, the shadowy slopes above us erupted into a seething mass of buffaloes like the angry hordes of a desecrated ants' nest.

Forming rapidly into a close-packed column, the great beasts, grunting and lowing, charged up the hillside in a lum-

bering gallop, like an avalanche in reverse. Bushes and grasses were pounded into crackling fragments under their thundering hooves, while francolin and spur-fowl rocketed sky-wards, cackling hysterically in shocked alarm as their roosting-places were overrun by the rumbling mass of black steaming bodies.

All of a sudden the great herd halted, milled around uncertainly for a moment, and then—as buffalo will when curiosity overcomes their caution—advanced slowly towards us on a broad front, chins well up, and halting occasionally to toss their horns or whisk their tails. In the forefront was a great, black bull with spreading horns so massive that I caught my breath and whistled in awed astonishment.

Even Sergeant Ngoboka was impressed. 'Eh, Eh, Eh!' he grunted in a rising crescendo. This was too much for the buffalo. With amazing agility for such massive beasts, they turned on their hooves like polo-ponies and in a moment were again in a thundering, close-packed column. They took a long time to disappear over the shoulder of the hill: when the old bull's sweeping horns were silhouetted against the sky-line at the top of the ridge, buffalo still poured from the bushes 400 yards behind.

It was difficult to estimate the size of this vast herd, as it was screened by small patches of dense bush, deep shadow, and a rising dust cloud of its own making. It must have been a thousand strong, but could have been a great deal more for the park authorities estimate their buffalo population at more than 40,000. Certainly it was one of the biggest herds of buffalo, with the highest proportion of large bulls, that I have ever seen in 20 years wandering on the game trails of Africa. Seen against the dramatic background of the great, rolling grass-covered hills, with the wide green swamps and shining waters of the Kagera River (the main artery of the

Nile) far below, all bathed in the fiery glow of the setting sun, this herd will remain as my most vivid memory of the Kagera National Park. Also unforgettable is an impression of spaciousness and grandeur: wide horizons, high hills, deep valleys and teeming herds of game.

Despite the fact that Kagera is one of the finest and oldest national game parks in the world, it has remained one of the least well known. This prolonged obscurity has been due to the unfortunate combination of conflicting political and geographical factors that have long plagued the small and struggling country in which it is located. Some knowledge of these factors is necessary in order to understand the park's present problems and to sympathise with or help those who are now faced with them.

The Kagera National Park covers much of the north-eastern part of the young Republic of Rwanda. Five years ago this country formed the northern half of the Belgian Mandated Territory of Ruanda-Urundi, situated between Uganda and Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in the north, east, and south, and the Belgian Congo on the west. Both geographically and ethnically, the Republic of Rwanda and the neighbouring Kingdom of Burundi are more naturally part of the English-speaking East African region than of the French-speaking Congo region. Nevertheless, after the First World War, when the League of Nations was shuffling and re-dealing Germany's former African colonial territories like a pack of well-worn cards, it found other and more compelling reasons to link Rwanda and Burundi with the Belgian-controlled Congo rather than with the British-controlled East Africa.

But for this political decision the  
*A pair of warthog bolt across the track. More tracks are needed; at present only a 90-mile drive across the park is possible*



Kagera National Park might never have come into being. Certainly if Rwanda had been entrusted to the stewardship of Great Britain, the park would not have been created until many years later, for the British did not begin to establish national parks in their African colonial territories until 1947. Since then, however, the British have forged ahead in Africa with modern ideas of national park development and the scientific management of wildlife as a natural resource. This is conceived as an economically valuable form of land use; the basis of a major international tourist industry. One of the main centres of this industry is now in the game areas of English-speaking East Africa, while Kagera National Park, to its detriment, lies just outside this region.

In the past Rwanda has always been the poor relation, the beautiful but impoverished orphan Cinderella tied to the apron strings of the rich and powerful Congo, with Burundi the more favoured twin. Nearly 50 years of Belgian administration, policy making, thinking, and education have left their inevitable mark, not least on Rwanda's wildlife conservation policies.

The Kagera National Park was created on 26 November 1934, at the instigation of the Institute of National Parks of the Belgian Congo. From its inception this body had been inspired by high ideals and its plans were far-sighted and generally sound, but 30 years ago no ordinary person could have foreseen the course that events in Africa have taken in the two decades since the Second World War. Thus the Kagera National Park was developed and managed by the Institute, in accordance with theories and principles that had been evolved in the famous, long-established Albert National Park in the neighbouring Belgian Congo.

To the Institute, the importance and interest of the Kagera Park was that it formed an essential part of the complementary pattern of different ecological areas in this part of Africa, which together make up a balanced zoological and botanical whole. The Institute aimed to create a similar pattern of totally preserved areas covering all the main ecological zones of this particular region of Africa. The development of the Kagera Park's tourist potential to aid Rwanda's economy took a minor place in the Institute's considerations, most of which were conducted in the detached atmosphere of its headquarters in Brussels.

Then, in 1960, the political volcano in Central Africa erupted with shattering violence and the Belgian Congo disintegrated into bloody chaos. There

followed a series of lesser, but still severe, political eruptions, both in the Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. The regional national parks organisation, so carefully built up by the Belgians during more tranquil times, was neither designed nor able to adapt itself to the drastically changed political conditions that ensued. Thus the small Republic of Rwanda, when it achieved its independence in 1962, found itself with a shaky economy; with its small Congo-oriented tourist trade in ruins; and with a national game park, covering a tenth of the country, that was an economic liability despite its outstanding attractions. The park, moreover, had been deprived of its last measure of really experienced direction and control when the last Belgian Conservator was murdered by Watutsi terrorists during the political birth-pangs immediately preceding independence.

Three years later, the British Ambassador to Rwanda, Mr J. S. Bennett, visited the Kagera National Park. Impressed, but also concerned at what he saw, he used his influence in appropriate quarters. As a result the British Government, through its Ministry of Overseas Development, offered to send an expert (together with a Land-Rover and other equipment) who would advise the Rwanda Government on the development and administration of the park, and assess its potential as a tourist attraction.

This offer was gratefully accepted, and early in June 1966, having agreed to undertake this short assignment, I found myself at Gabiro, the headquarters of the Kagera National Park, some 40 miles south of the Rwanda-Uganda border. I had been delayed by the short but violent Baganda rebellion which had temporarily marooned my Land-Rover in Kampala, 300 miles away in the heart of Uganda, but I still had the greater part of a month in hand.

My previous knowledge of the area stood me in good stead. I had known the Kagera National Park during the years that I had been Chief Game Warden of Uganda. We shared a common boundary along the Kagera River, and there had been close liaison, particularly in the control of poaching, between the Uganda Game Department and the Kagera Park's Wardens and their African 'Guards. However I had transferred to Tanganyika in 1960 and had not visited Gabiro itself since 1958, so I was happy and relieved to see that there was little apparent change. True, there were signs of wear and tear in roads, buildings and equipment, and the Belgian Wardens had gone,

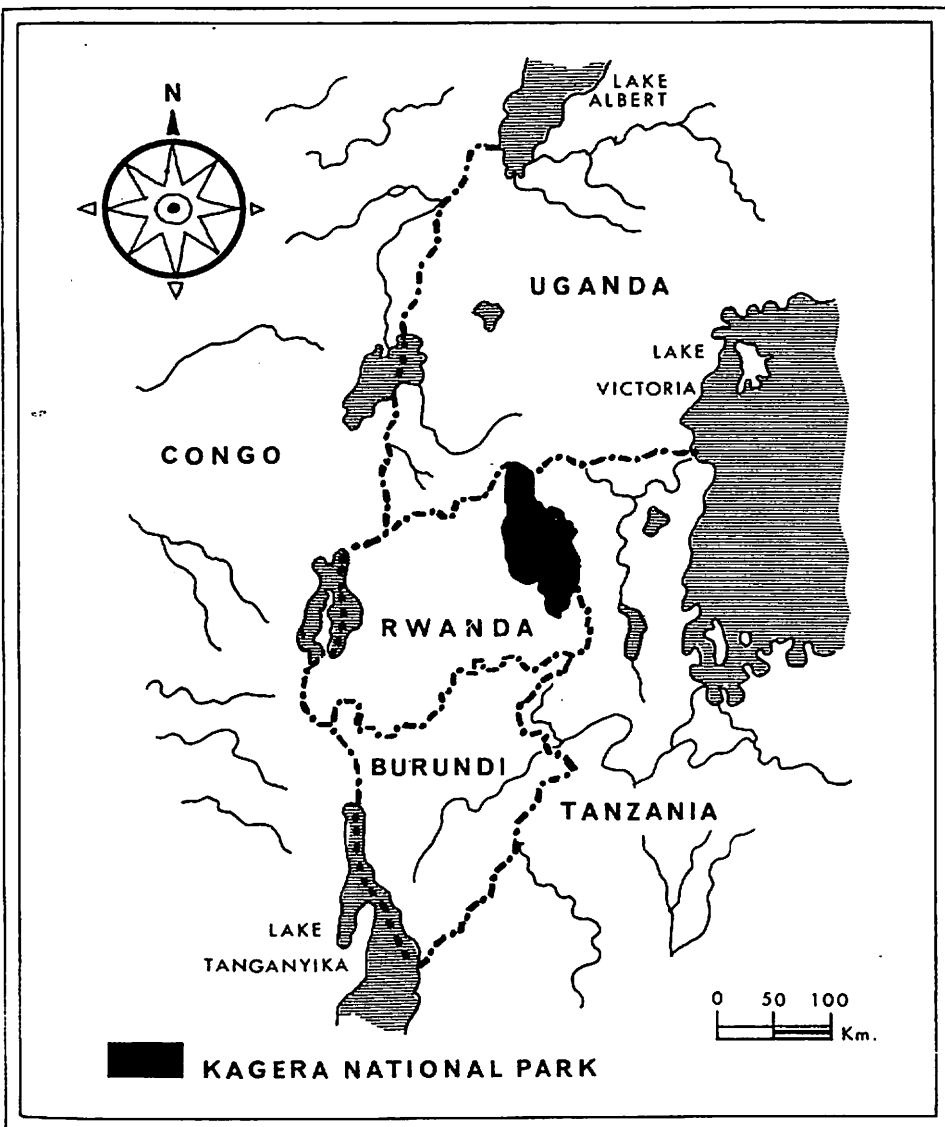
but a number of the more senior African members of the park's staff had served under the old regime and it was clear that the administration and management had continued strictly in accordance with time-honoured practice and long-established routine.

The Park Guards were alert, cheerful, and polite and, as in the past, smartly turned out, each one in a clean khaki uniform and capped with a distinctive olive-green fez. Little relaxation in discipline was noticeable and for this, as well as the general state of the park, much credit is due to the present Conservator, Andre Gakarama, and to such stalwart retainers as the park's senior guard, Sergeant Andrea Ngoboko, who has 16 years service behind him.

M. Gakarama is a young Rwandaise who in 1962, at the age of 28, found himself suddenly pitchforked into the job of Conservator of the Park when his Belgian predecessor, Guy de Leyn, was shot down in cold blood by Watutsi terrorists at Gabiro. Besides having had no formal technical or scientific training to fit him for the post, and only short experience as assistant to M. de Leyn, M. Gakarama had no one to whom he could turn for advice or help after the latter's death. Yet he carried on undaunted, and has continued to do so ever since, despite quite inadequate funds, vehicles, and equipment.

Such was the situation I found when I arrived to look, probe, and advise, with the cheerful, willing and courteous co-operation of the Conservator and his assistant the young, keen, and hard-working Chef de Poste, Laurent Bucyibaruta, and his small force of 40 Kagera Park Guards. With their help and local knowledge my task was not only simple but a pleasure to undertake. It was rendered even more so by the hospitable assistance that I received from Mr and Mrs Mick Nolan, an Irish couple who manage the Kagera Guest House which was my base. At present this small safari lodge at Gabiro is the only tourist accommodation serving the park. It is, in fact, the only tourist accommodation within a reasonable day's motoring distance from any main centre, but its current popularity is certainly due very largely to the cheerful management and excellent catering of Mr and Mrs Nolan. The obstacles they have to overcome daily would soon deter a less able and adaptable couple, and serve to underline the basic difficulties which face any major tourist development plan for this area.

Whatever the difficulties and problems



Top: The park's conservator, André Gakarama (right) who deserves much of the credit for the present state of the park. Next to him is Corporal Karamuka in the park guard's smart uniform. Above: Map showing the location of the Kagera National Park

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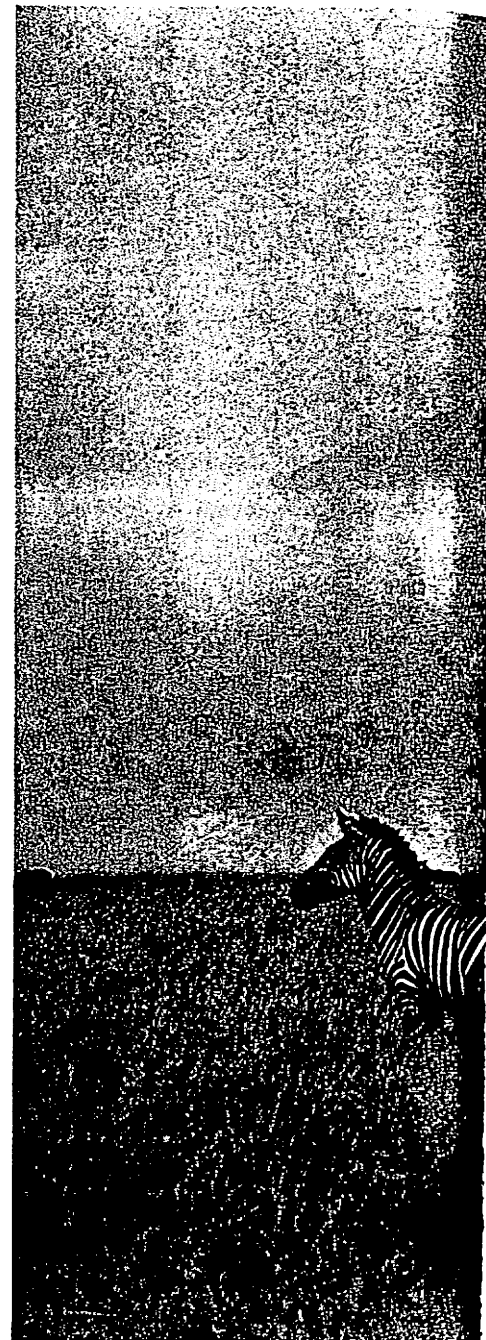
PRESIDENT: THE RIGHT HON. THE EARL OF LISTOWEL, P.C., G.C.M.G.



*In Kagera Park the author saw some of the largest herds and finest animals of his 20 years on the game trails of Africa.*

*Below: Two old buffalo bulls on the central plain of the park with herds of topi in the background.*

*Bottom: Impala bucks grazing by the side of the park track. Right: Zebra grazing contentedly while grass fires sweep the plain*



**CONTINUED FROM OVERLEAF**

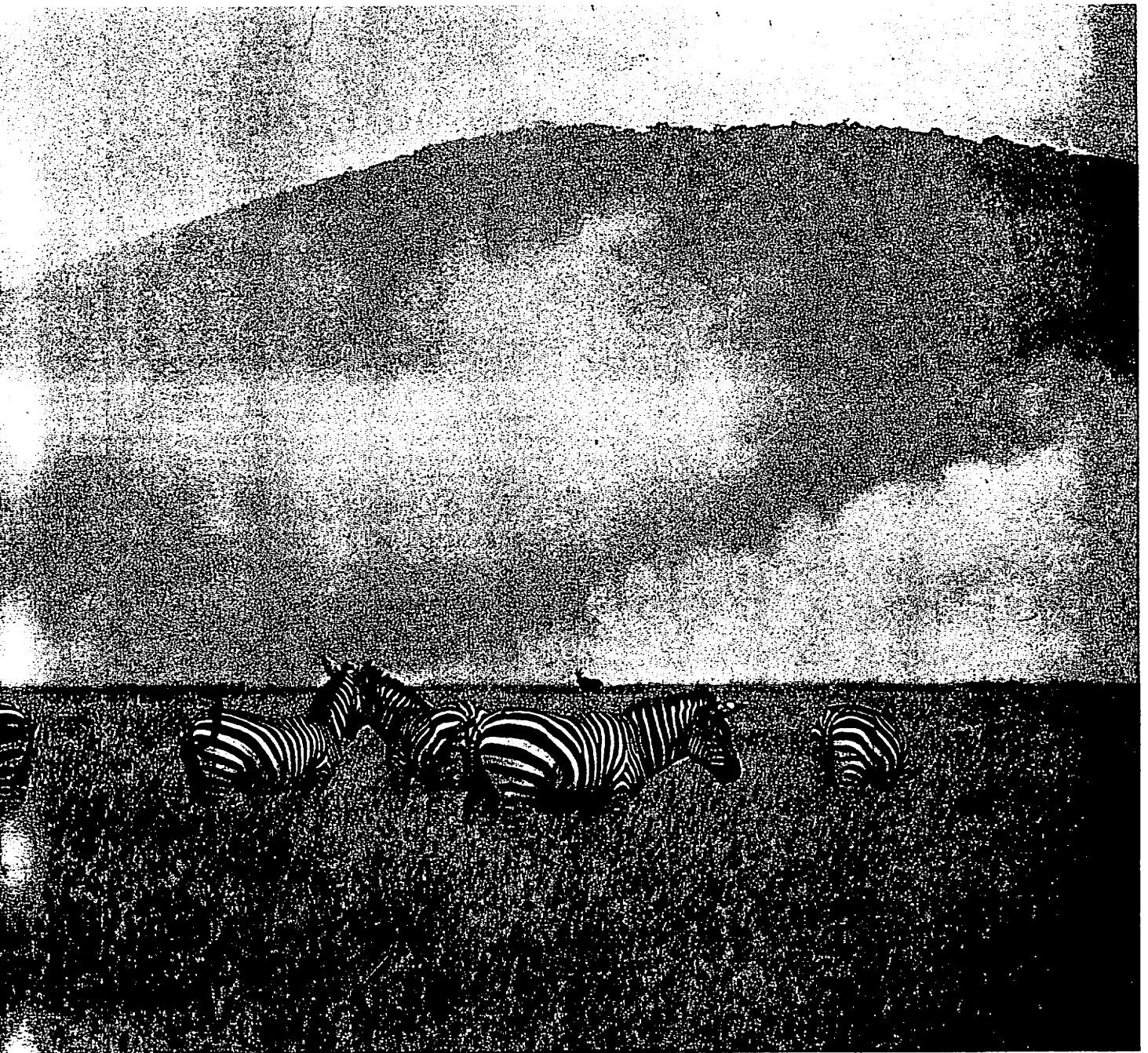
that may stand in the way of the scenery and wild life of the Kagera Park being made reasonably accessible for the normal visitor, both are quite outstanding in quality and quantity. The attractions of the park are largely different from, and complementary to – as opposed to being competitive with – the attractions of the national game parks of neighbouring Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. This is of paramount importance because the long term future of the Kagera National Park must inevitably depend on the speedy development of a flourishing tourist industry in Rwanda. It is glaringly apparent that, under the prevailing conditions in the Congo and East African regions, this

can only be achieved by bringing Rwanda into the East African tourist circuit – more particularly into the Uganda tourist circuit, for the Rwanda border, and even the Kagera Park itself, is within a reasonable day's run by car, on good roads, from Kampala or Entebbe.

This development could be started in a small way with the present limited tourist accommodation in Rwanda, but the lack of safari lodges and tourist hotels in the right places is the first major obstacle to be overcome. One quick, short-term answer to the problem is to use standing, tented camps, as has been done with considerable success in East Africa.

The Kagera National Park covers a

total area of nearly 12,000 square miles and is large enough to accommodate at least two, possibly three, good-sized safari-lodges within its boundaries. Unlike a number of the more famous and popular parks in Africa it can remain open to visitors all the year round. The climate is generally mild and temperate, and the distribution of the various wild-life populations in the park lends itself well to a system of zoning and planned track circuits. At present the tourist is limited to one track which leads from Gabiro, on the western side of the park, eastward to the Kagera River and back, an overall distance of some 90 miles. Scenically this drive is inspiring and



passes through fine and varied game country in which great herds of topi, impala, zebra, buffalo, eland and other species are certain to be seen. Half of the drive, however, retraces the same route, so many more tracks are needed.

The vegetation of the Kagera Park is mainly grassy savannah which, with the high, rolling, quartzite hills, gives the park its atmosphere of spaciousness. Under these conditions the great herds of game are shown off to their best advantage - better than in many of the more famous national game parks of Africa.

In addition to their estimate of 40,000 buffalo, the park authorities believe they have the same number of impala, nearly

20,000 topi, and as many zebra. There are undoubtedly enormous numbers of these four species in the park. I personally counted individual herds of impala which were over 200 strong, as well as the vast herds of buffalo described earlier. What is more, many of the beasts in these great herds were probably among the finest specimens in Africa, indicating optimum habitat conditions and population levels - encouraging signs for the park.

Among other spectacular species in the park are many eland, fair numbers of handsome roan antelope, waterbuck, ever-amusing wart-hog, and many lesser species. The park lions are inclined to be

retiring. but there are believed to be 300 of them and I found fresh lion kills daily, betrayed by the circling vultures. There are still a handful of anxiously guarded black rhino in the thorn scrub near the Kagera River in the remote eastern areas of the park. The birds are as numerous and varied as the mammals.

Such is the Kagera National Park, the Cinderella of Africa's great wildlife areas: poor but physically beautiful; struggling gallantly along in the background; wistful but uncomplaining; proud but anxious for material and technical help. I, for one, fervently hope that the help that is needed will come - and in time. It is well deserved.