

CONSERVATION

FOCUS ON
Akagera
NATIONAL PARK, RWANDA



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The Akagera National Park in northeastern Rwanda is dominated by swamps and small lakes that follow in the wake of River Kagera, the most distant headstream of River Nile and Lake Victoria's largest tributary.

All the water sources work together to form a remarkable ecosystem. The park is surrounded by cultivated hills, with the landscape composed of wide savannah plains, *Euphorbia candelabra* shrub and both thick and thin forests.

Founded in 1934 by Belgian authorities, Akagera was one of the largest protected wetlands in Africa. It used to cover over 2,500km² (nearly 10 per cent of Rwanda) but many refugees returning after the 1994 genocide settled in the area, cutting trees for timber, poaching wildlife

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PHOTOS BY: KEITH KINAMBUGA

for food and invading savannah grasslands with tens of thousands of their livestock. In 1997, the Park was reduced to 1,122 km² and wildlife continued to be killed by poachers.

In late 2009, African Parks signed a joint management agreement with the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) establishing the Akagera Management Company (AMC) with board members from both the RDB and African Parks (AP) jointly managing the park. There is a 20-year agreement and all income or funding is retained in the park.

Following the erection of a 120-kilometre fence and the employment and training of field





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rangers, bushmeat poaching has been brought under control with thousands of snares recovered and many arrests made. In 2017, some 37,000 visitors came to the park, of whom 50 per cent were Rwandan citizens, generating \$1.6 million in revenue that enabled the park to become about 75 per cent self-financing.

Since the start of the agreement, AP has invested over \$20 million on operations and capital expenditure in Akagera with more to follow as a community centre is to be built with an environmental education and community training area, office, retail area and demonstration garden. A dormitory will be constructed to house schoolchildren visiting from faraway.

So what can the visitor expect to see?

There are over 100 elephants in the park alongside Cape buffalo, zebra, Maasai giraffe, hippo, crocodile, topi, Cape eland, impala, sitatunga, warthog, oribi and bush buck. Primate species include vervet monkey, olive baboon, silver monkey and some blue monkeys. Night game drives offer the best opportunity to see

TOP LEFT: One of over a hundred elephants in Akagera National Park.

TOP RIGHT: Lions have been re-introduced in the park.

BELOW LEFT/RIGHT: Leopard and Eland are also some of the animals you can see in the park.

leopards, lions, civets, serval cats, hyenas, as well as the large-eyed bush babies. Seven lions were reintroduced in 2015, growing to 22 by 2018. With black rhinos also re-introduced, Akagera became a “Big Five” park -- the only one in Rwanda.

There are over 500 bird species, including migratory endemic ones and rare gems such as the near threatened Papyrus Gonolek, the local Red-faced Barbet, and the sought after Swamp Flycatcher and elusive Shoebill Stork.

Boat safaris are organised on Lake Ihema while fishing is allowed in Lake Shakani, and you get to keep the catch!

Visitors to the Park have a choice of places to stay. The government-owned Akagera Game Lodge, at one time the only accommodation available, overlooks Lake Ihema and is open throughout the year. With 64 rooms, the lodge can also accommodate small to medium sized business meetings, workshops and conferences.

Ruzizi Tented Lodge was designed and built by the Akagera Management Company and opened

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PHOTO BY: SCMP.COM



PHOTO BY: ABHISHEK SINGH/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

in 2013. It is a 20-bed tented Eco-camp linked by boardwalks, located on the shores of Lake Ihema, Rwanda's second largest lake.

The seasonal Karengwe Bush Camp is set up twice a year. Karengwe is named after the area in which it is located at the northern end of the park. Highly exclusive, it has room for only 12 visitors in 6 tents. In 2019, the camp will be open all-year except for April and November to mid-December.

There are also three campsites: Mutumba in the north at the highest point in the park; Shakani on the shores of Lake Shakani; Muyumbu, on a ridge, offering breathtaking views over lakes Ihema and Shakani and into neighbouring Tanzania. It is close to the park entrance gate at Kiyonza.

Wilderness Safaris is establishing the six-tented Magashi Camp in the northeastern part of Akagera overlooking Lake Rwanyakazinga, home to one of Africa's highest hippo densities, large crocodiles and the secretive sitatunga and the Shoebill Stork.

TOP: Hippos at Lake Ihema in Akagera National Park.

BELOW: Crocodile in Lake Rwanyakazinga.

500

Number of bird species, including migratory endemic ones and rare gem found in Akagera National Park

The Rwandan Development Board (RDB) is the designated implementing agency for Tourism Development and Conservation of protected areas policies in Rwanda. Its mission is to transform Rwanda into a dynamic hub for business, investment and innovation, with a mission to fast-track economic development in Rwanda by enabling private sector growth. The RDB is the government agency responsible for managing Rwanda's national parks and protected areas.

African Parks (AP) pioneered the concept of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in protected area management. Central to the concept of a PPP is a separation of responsibilities between the State and African Parks. The State is the owner of the park and is responsible for legislation and policy. African Parks is responsible for the execution of management functions and is accountable to the State for performance. The separation of functions is essential for producing results. African Parks is funded by a number of strategic partners with the Akagera National Park project receiving particular support from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation and The Wyss Foundation.



PHOTO BY: GAEL MANDE WEGHE/AFRICAN PARKS

WITH BLACK RHINO ALSO RE-INTRODUCED, AKAGERA BECAME A “BIG FIVE” PARK – THE ONLY ONE IN RWANDA.

BLACK RHINOS RE-INTRODUCED

The Institute of National Parks of the Belgian Congo decided to bring in black rhinos in 1958. Six were caught in the Karagwe region of Tanganyika, now Tanzania.

Civil unrest hit central Africa in 1960 and one of the results was the founding of Rwanda in 1962. Britain offered assistance to the new government and, in 1966, sent an expert to advise the administration on wildlife management. Bruce Kinloch, former Chief Game Warden of Uganda, undertook a short placement working alongside the Rwandan conservator.

The rhinos did well in Akagera and it was reported their population rose to 90 at one point. However, official data shows the population at 30 in 1980 due to intense poaching across East Africa. In 1990, only 9 were reported and by 2003 the number had fallen to a single individual. No rhinoceros were recorded in Rwanda in 2007.

Some years later Howard G. Buffett, Chairman and CEO of the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, made a commitment to President Paul Kagame to support the reintroduction of rhinos in

Translocated Eastern black rhinos awaiting release. The reintroduction of rhinos is a significant step for rhino conservation on the continent and comes with a big responsibility to ensure their protection.

Rwanda. In May 2017, the Foundation funded the translocation of 10 female and 8 male black rhinos from South Africa to Akagera. The People's Postcode Lottery and the Dutch Government provided additional support to develop the facilities, including state-of-the-art holding/release pens, to ensure the rhinos' health and safety.

With a population now standing at 19 and a carrying capacity for black rhinos of 150-160, it is hoped that more rhinos will become available for translocation into the park in the future.

SECURITY AND TECHNOLOGY

The rhinos and other wildlife are well protected by some 70 rangers and 24 fencers aided by a specialist wildlife dog unit of 6 adults and 10 puppies and the latest technology. All rangers received tracking training with 8 selected as specialists. Nine of the rhinos had transmitters fitted and can be tracked by telemetry. The overall aim is to physically see each rhino at least once per week.

A digital radio network was developed with towers erected in high points throughout the park to implement a Local Area Network (LoRa), which does not require internet access or phone networks. Small solar-operated devices fixed to park vehicles, motorbikes, and boats communicate with the towers. A LoRa Network is a telecommunication network designed to allow



PHOTOS BY: MARCUS WESTBERG/AFRICAN PARKS



TOP & BELOW: Security has long been a major concern at wildlife reserves in Africa, where rhino and elephant populations have been decimated by poachers in recent years. Anti-poaching dogs and well equipped rangers, always on alert, help keep animals in Akagera National Park safe.

long range communications at low cost compared to satellite technology. Its signal is almost impossible to be detected by poachers and runs on solar energy. By May 2017, full coverage of the park was achieved, including the placement of 80 GPS trackers, generating over 140,000 location updates per day.

Satellite technology is employed in the form of collars to track elephant and lion movements with GPS embedded digital radios giving ranger locations.

The Domain Awareness System (DAS) developed by Vulcan Technologies has been installed in the control room. The system brings together in a single interactive viewing map GPS readings of animal movements, radio and vehicle trackers, camera trap photos, and weather conditions in surrounding human settlements where poachers are likely to originate. Bringing all the information together in one place in real-time enables the operations room staff to get a full picture of what is happening in the park in order to quickly coordinate a response when needed. ●

HOW TO GET THERE

From Rwanda's capital, Kigali, drive towards the airport, take a left turn about 100m before you reach the airport. You will then be heading east towards Rwamagana. Drive through Rwamagana and on to Kayonza. At Kayonza, take the right turn at the roundabout. After Discentre petrol station take a left turn and drive on for about 15km till you come to a junction at Rwinkwavu. You will see a signpost that reads Akagera National Park to the left. The park gates are about 13km ahead after the signpost. 4x4 vehicles can be arranged by your safari operator. Most tour companies will provide a driver and a guide.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Be sure that your visa is in order. Visas can be obtained upon arrival at the airport for \$30. If you are from Germany, Sweden, DRC, Mauritius, South Africa, Hong Kong, Uganda, Kenya or Tanzania, you do not need a visa, but a valid passport is required.

➕ FIND OUT MORE

For more about the Akagera National Park visit: <https://www.akageranationalpark.org/>