

## CONSERVATION MILESTONE

# Nairobi National Park Marks 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Gazetted in 1946, the Nairobi National Park has survived for 75 years, a remarkable feat given the growing forces that threaten its existence.

## PHOTOS AND STORY BY DELTA WILLIS

**M**ervyn Cowie grew up in a mud hut 30 miles from Nairobi, with lions and hyenas sniffing at the door at night. Sent to England to study, when he returned he was shocked to see how wildlife had diminished on the Athi Plains south of the city.

“Where there had been 1,000 animals, you saw only 100.” His campaign to establish national parks ignored, in 1937 Cowie became an *agent provocateur*, sending a letter to the *East African Standard* signed Old Settler. Why not slaughter wildlife to make room for development and agriculture, which swayed local farmers. But public outrage eventually won.

That outcome spanned two wars. World War II began in 1939, with Cowie serving with the Kenya regiment. Meanwhile, a War against Nature raged. For example, the Kenya Game Department commissioned J.A. Hunter to kill Black rhino in an area where people would be resettled. From 1944 to 1946, Hunter killed nearly a thousand (996) Black rhino. Ironically, the land proved useless for a settlement of members of the Akamba community, and he later regretted his role.



Mervyn Cowrie found an ally in Archie Richie, the first chief game warden for Kenya. But it was Cowrie’s vision that led to Kenya’s Tsavo, Murchison Falls and Queen Elizabeth National Parks in Uganda, and the Serengeti in Tanzania.

The smallest park was only 117 square kilometres (44 square miles.) Nairobi National Park (NNP) was not only the first park in Kenya but the first park in East Africa. Gazetted on December 16, 1946, this precious gem has survived for 75 years, all the more remarkable because of the growing forces against it.

**INSERT**

Zebra at Athi Dam, frequented by big crocodiles and hippo.

**BELOW**

White rhino and calf graze beneath the Nairobi skyline.



## CONSERVATION

In the beginning, the park was seven kilometres from the centre of Nairobi. Now rare rhino browse beneath looming skyscrapers that border this green oasis like New York's Central Park, both designated Important Bird Areas.

While there were six Black rhino surviving when the park began, extraordinary initiatives created a haven for endangered pachyderms. Twenty-two Black rhino were brought into the park in 1966. "The newcomers have produced only one serious conflict with a resident rhinoceros and two collisions with motor vehicles;" wrote P. H. Hamilton and J. M. King in 1969. "Despite the small size of the Park, the inadequacy of its boundaries, and the legendary intolerance of the species,



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it would appear the translocation operations have been a success."

NNP is perfect for Black rhino, according to zoologist Lucy Vigne; the habitat is well suited. Indeed, many prefer the Langata Forest, or areas with bushland shrubs. Between 1978 and 1980, ten more rhino were introduced to the park, translocated from the foothills of the Aberdares. More than 150 Black rhino have been born here.

Because they compete, the maximum capacity inside the park is 59. So like the nearby AFEW (African Fund for Endangered Wildlife) sanctuary for rare Rothschild giraffe, this breeding success enhances other regions. All rhinos in Nakuru National Park came from Nairobi, while rhino in Laikipia benefitted from Nairobi graduates bringing variety to their gene pool. Tragically, eleven died in 2018 when transferred to Tsavo, the move made despite unsuitable vegetation and saline water.

In 2020, a White rhino calf was born in Nairobi National Park. The mother was part

#### **INSERT**

Male Grant's gazelle in foreground, female on right.

#### **BELOW**

Lions are accustomed to vehicles but don't get too close.

### **DID YOU KNOW**

**Four of the big five are part of the main attractions in Nairobi National Park.**



of translocation in 2009 when Southern White rhino were welcomed. “I just happened to be near the Hyena Dam just after 18h00 on the evening of the first release;” wrote Gareth Jones, former chairman of Friends of Nairobi National Park, “It was a fantastic sight to witness as the first white rhino stepped out of the transport crate.” A frequent visitor to the park, Jones explains, “The White Rhino gets its name from the Dutch (Afrikaans) “Wyd” meaning wide, due to their square mouths designed for grazing.” So they favour open grasslands, not competing with Black rhino that browse.

All rhino in the park are guarded 24/7 by an armed team of rangers.

Game counts provide updates to the Kenya Wildlife Service on populations, including robust herds of Cape buffalo (introduced in the mid-1960s) and birds; Nairobi National Park has more ostrich than any other park in Kenya. These Citizen Science exercises involve volunteers from Friends of Nairobi National Park, who arrive at dawn when each vehicle is assigned a block of the park. With none of the rigour of aerial surveys or GPS, these guesstimates can still indicate trends.

Early baseline data were lost after Ian Parker and Alistair Graham “were contracted to go through all Departmental files from the earliest years, extract all faunal records from them and put them on a card index system which we designed.” Further from Parker, “The Game Department under its new management then burned all the old files as colonial relics.” After computers arrived, “The Wildlife Research Unit believed card index


systems were obsolete and binned the cards.”

Parker writes of the early days. “While the aim was to keep it as a sanctuary of sorts, Nairobi National Park was never seen or intended as a major game conservation unit. That role was foreseen for the great Southern Game Reserve, across the Mbagathi River” where wildlife corridors have since been curtailed by fences, homes, flower farms and quarries.

The southern boundary was once open to wildebeest that migrated in great herds. Maasai and their cattle migrated in search of greener grasses, too. About three decades ago, people began to acquire small plots in Kitengela, building permanent homes. Animals still move when it rains, but lions following prey now encounter livestock. Blinking “Lion Lights” installed by David Mascall deter big cats, but insufficient funding forces him to become a diplomat, urging patience to a herder who recently lost 20 goats to a leopard. Owners retaliate by spearing predators, even innocent ones. Big cats pay in other ways; the leopard Nguruman was translocated and lost, and the lion Mohawk mowed down after a traffic snarl grew around him; he was hit by deadly bullets instead of tranquillizers.

“Nairobi is one of the fastest growing cities on the planet,” wrote Mugo Kibati, a business leader in sustainable energy. “The benefits of the National Park next door - often taken for granted in the past - are becoming ever more readily apparent as Nairobi enters a dramatic new phase of rapid economic growth and urban expansion under Kenya’s new 2030

**BELOW**  
Nairobi National Park has more ostrich than any other park in Kenya.



**>600**

**Number of bird species in the Nairobi National Park. About 500 of them are permanent and migratory species in the park.**

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**7km**

**The distance Nairobi National Park is from the capital city of Kenya.**



## CONSERVATION

development agenda....it is important that we make the long term security of the National Park the inviolable core of our development thinking for the city.... Think of all the essential services the Park delivers, through serving as 'lungs' of the capital [and] much-needed recreational space...."

The park remains a green oasis for thousands of school children. While international tourists did average 100,000 per year, during the pandemic, Kenya residents came in record numbers. There were 800 vehicles on one busy Sunday in 2020. Over 1,000 visit the Nairobi Orphanage on holiday weekends, mostly local families with children who might otherwise never see a cheetah up close.

Of the original 177 square hectares demarked, how much remains protected today? Construction of the Southern Bypass took 53 acres, the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) more, despite a stop order issued by a court. Then Kenya Railways built an access road linking the Nairobi Inland Container Depot and the Southern Bypass. The road is over four kilometres long and 21 metres wide. The National Environment Tribunal (NET) wrote the road "will impact on it negatively resulting in loss of habitat, vegetation, and compromising with the ability to provide vital ecosystem services."

In 2020, Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta said the time had come for national parks to have title deeds to protect them from land grabbers. "From the time Nairobi National Park was established, instead of stripping land from the park, the government is increasing

the land so that we can preserve that park not only for us but for our children's children."

His father's words appear at the East Gate entrance: "The natural resources of this country, its wildlife, which offers such an attraction to visitors from all over the world, the beautiful places in which these animals live, the mighty forests, which guard water catchment areas so vital to the survival of man and beast, are a priceless heritage for the future. The government of Kenya fully realising the value of its natural resources, pledges itself to conserve them for posterity with all the means at its disposal."

What response might a newspaper receive today to an *agent provocateur*?

"There is so much space behind the Ngong Hills. Take the animals there. This national park is like plaque on the walls of an artery constraining the growth of the city."

"It should be turned into a full-blown, commercial Safari Park with restaurants and Ferris wheels."

A notch below the comment section, but printed above under the guise of journalism, there is a divisive campaign by people with axes to grind. It grows like an invasive weed, bitter and subsuming, but is destroyed when roots are exposed to the sun. ●

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*For two decades Delta Willis explored the parks of East Africa as Chief Contributor to Fodor's Travel Guides to Kenya & Tanzania, in addition to researching her books and profiles of scientists.*

### BELOW

An eland, Africa's largest antelope, its elegant spiral horns against the city's skyscrapers.

# 1946

**The year Nairobi National Park was gazetted. It is the oldest National Park in Kenya. The Park is free-ranging and is only fenced off on the areas closest to the city.**

# 1977

**Year the Elephant orphanage in the Park was founded. It is the centre for rehabilitation and rearing of orphaned baby elephants.**

