

**TransNzoia's wildlife then and now.**  
**by Peter Rosa**

The plains between Mt Elgon and the Cherangani Hills are full of small farms today. Birdlife is still prolific but large wildlife had been "*malisad*", incompatible with the demands of intensive agriculture and farming. It was not always so. Sir Harry Johnston described the Uasin Gishu and Trans Nzoia in 1902 as a place where "countless wild animals roam, completely protected by the British Sportsman and his oft-times insensate ravages" He added:

*"Here may be seen large herds of giraffes as one may see cattle peacefully standing about in an English park. These giraffe are the finest developments yet we know the northern form. But giraffes are not the only large game on these glorious downs. Elephants may be seen in great herds close by. Where you see the giraffes, you also see numerous rhinos in couples, male and female, or a female alone with her snub nosed calf. It is a glorious sight say an hour after the sun has risen, and the shadows are beginning to shorten, to traverse this grass country and see the zoological garden turned loose. Herds of zebra and Jackson's hartebeest mingle together, and, in the face of the sunlight, become a changing procession of silver and gold the sleek coats of the zebras in the level sunlight mingling in their black stripes and snowy intervals into a uniform silver grey, whilst the coats of the hartebeest are simply red gold. Dotted about the on the outskirts of the throng are jet-black cock ostriches. Red and silver jackals slink and snap; grotesque warthogs of a dirty gray with erect tails and white bristles, scurry before the traveler until they can bolt into some burrow of the ant-bear. Males of the noble waterbuck, strangely like the English red deer, appear at a distance, browsing with their hornless, doe like females, or gazing the approaching traveler with heads erect and the maned neck and splendid carriage of Landseer's stags. Gray-yellow reedbuck bend their lissome bodies into such a bounding gallop that the spine seems to become concave as the animal's rear is flung into the air. The dainty topi with a coat of red, mauve, black and yellow satin bordered with a cream colour, stands at gaze, his coat like watered silk as the sunlight follows the wavy growth of his glistening hair. Lions and leopards may both be seen frequently in broad daylight, hanging about those herds of game, though apparently causing no dismay to the browsing antelopes."*

The prolific wildlife and its apparent tameness reflected a period in the late 19th Century when the Trans Nzoia and much of the Uasin Gishu were sparsely populated. This resulted from a double calamity which afflicted the inhabitants, the Uasin Gishu Maasai. They were heavily defeated in war by the Nandi, and then waves of rinderpest killed off most of the cattle that the survivors of the war needed to subsist on. Some wildlife species such as buffalo and kudu also were heavily reduced by this disease, but the remaining species prospered with little competition from people.

With the settlement of the Uasin Gishu and TransNzoia in the 1920s, this "zoological garden" was doomed. By the 1940s elephants were confined to the Mt Elgon and Cherangani forests, and rhino had all been exterminated. Predatorst were the first to go as settler farmers feared for their livestock. (In writing this, the memory of Mr. Claasen, our neighbour, particularly comes to mind. He had a withered arm where a leopard had mauled him on his farm in the 1930s). Zebra and large antelopes were quickly eliminated too, to reduce competition for grazing, to contain any risk of disease being transmitted to cattle, and to minimise damage to crops. Some pockets of larger plains game persisted on a few sympathetic farms. In the 1960s, herds of Rothschild's giraffe and Jackson's hartebeest could still be seen at Soy. Uganda kob were locally common on farms in Lugari. Topi, giraffe, hartebeest, zebra, the odd roan antelope were to be found on some Endebess and Kwanza estates (the last zones to be settled). A small population of sitatunga were protected at Siwa swamp. This is now a national park, preserving the only population left in Kenya.

By the mid seventies, however, the remnant Endebess herds had disappeared. My departing image in 1973, when I visited the the recently sold estate in Endebess, where the pictures of giraffe and topi were taken, was of a Jackson's hartebeest leaping in front of the car pursued by a pack of farm dogs. The giraffe and hartebeest at Soy initially were given a lease of life when a Kenyan airforce base was established there, but a decision was soon made to move them on. Many Soy giraffe were translocated to form new breeding herds in Nakuru National Park, Ruma Game Reserve near Homa Bay, even Kidepo National Park in Uganda. By 2003 they had all been moved. This concern did not extend to the remnant topi, hartebeest and waterbuck. The fate of roan antelope remains unclear. It is likely that the few remaining around Kwanza in 1970 may have perished from drought. That year the late Derek Forester showed me slides of a roan calf he had rescued on the Kwanza farm he was managing, that had lost its mother. This was probably the last photograph of a Trans Nzoia roan.

Some idea of what the Trans Nzoia and Uasin Gishu used to be like can be experienced in the Pain Upe Game Reserve, North of Mt. Elgon and surrounding the scenic Mt. Debassian in Uganda. This Karamoja game reserve is being rehabilitated at present, and is open to visitors.