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Katavi

Katavi National Park is sometimes described as ‘near’ Mahale, but this must be recognised as a purely relative term with reference to Tanzanian distances. Deceptively accessible on maps, the ‘main’ road through Western Tanzania that runs merrily through the middle of Katavi is by no means a smooth ride. Despite its great size, 4471 sq km/ 2780 miles square, and its inherent variety of animal and birdlife, it is perhaps one of the most underestimated of all the Tanzanian National Parks, although those who do set up camp on its plains are quite content to leave it that way.

The landscape of Katavi, together with Rukwa National Park, was created as a result of a minor fault in the Western Albertine Rift which formed a wide alluvial plain. The park has a central, very flat valley floor which forms spectacular flood plains after the rains, and attracts huge herds to its bounty from the surrounding hills. The broad blonde plain becomes a mass of tall flowing grasses at the height of the dry season, extending to distant mountains beyond. These grassy plains attract enormous herds of buffalo, especially during July, and herds of elephant gather here around February each year. Operators familiar with the park claim that the animals in Katavi haven’t read any of the behavioural rulebooks for their species, so explaining why huge herds of hippos here routinely gather to spend hours sunbathing during the heat of the day.

When to Visit

Katavi comes into its own during the dry season between May and October, when the plains animals gather into herds and assemble at the remaining waterholes. But the park becomes a birdwatcher’s paradise during the Christmas months, after the November rains, although the animal life is widely dispersed and thus less in evidence.