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Ruaha National Park

The wide distances of Ruaha National Park have a drama and atmosphere quite unlike any other Tanzanian park. Here the land has its own kind of remoteness that seems to emanate through time itself. It is an ancient place in the valley of the Great Rift, where mile upon mile of sandy red earth feels worn and bleached by an age-old sun, and the hilly distances are punctuated with distended elephant-battered girths of countless massive baobabs that live for a thousand years. Such a charismatic combination of ochre-red earth, pale russet grasses and the parched paths of wide sand rivers appeal to all old preconceptions of an archetypal African land.

Part of the present-day attraction of Ruaha is its distant location, which demands a long drive or an expensive flight to get there, and means that the park is consequently hardly visited by tourists, and major tracts of the landscape are still largely inaccessible. Covering 10,300 sq km, Ruaha is the second largest National Park in Tanzania after the Serengeti. It flows down from the high plateau around Njombe River in the northwest and then slopes across a wide valley to the Great Ruaha River in the southeast. Such a vast and fascinating landscape makes it an ideal location for a longer safari, with between four and seven nights recommended, not least to make the flying costs worthwhile. There are presently just two alternatives for permanent accommodation within the National Park, each run by brothers who explored this land as children, but two other sites have been awarded for semi-permanent development to The Selous Safari Company and Coastal Travel. Trips to Ruaha are often combined with the Selous Game Reserve, as the two locations are entirely complimentary for their differences, and part of the same scheduled flight route.

Wildlife

The joy of Ruaha is that there are hardly any people there at all, but a variety of heavy-duty wildlife lays claim to its hilly savannah and bush. Ruaha has one of the greatest elephant populations of any African park, and the dry, open hillsides encourage antelope and buffalo to gather into protective large herds. This terrain is particularly good for seeing predators, especially lion and potentially leopard, as well as packs of African hunting dog. The many rivers and swamps around the Ruaha River are alive with huge numbers of hippopotami, crocodile and fish, and the many giraffe and zebra that roam the plains make their way to the shores of the water to drink. Ruaha is the only east African park with both Greater and Lesser Kudu and sable and roan antelopes, and, like the Selous, has an unusual combination of East and Southern African wildlife and birds. The Red-billed wood hoopoe, Violet-crested Turaco and Racquet-tailed roller are among the many coloured migrants, and just a small selection from the 480 species of bird that have

been sighted within the park. The wetter months during the first third of the year are the best months for bird-watching, and the beauty of the park is enhanced by the blooming miombo woodland flowers. The miombo woodlands are dominated by 15 species of *Brachystegia* trees, while the rolling grass plains are covered with various different acacias, spiny *Commiphora* and plenty of baobab trees; around 1,650 plant species have been identified within the park, the majority of which flower.

In past years poaching has been a serious problem, decreasing the famously huge population of 22,000 elephant recorded in 1967 to only 4,000 in 1987. This still represents one of the largest populations in any African National Park, and it is more heartening to know that numbers have recovered up to 12,000 during the last decade as a result of the Park's very successful anti-poaching action, which has made exemplary efforts to involve local communities. The result of this serious dent to the elephant population now means that there are fewer mature animals that have grown to full size (usually around 60 years of age), and it is rare to see any elephant with a fully developed pair of tusks.

These days it is more common to come across tuskless and small tusked elephants, once an anomaly and yet now represented in a far higher proportion since these survived the brutal culling. This often inspires ruminations on the miracle of natural selection, but it still remains to be seen whether future generations will breed a larger proportion of small tusk and tuskless elephants, or whether the large tusk gene that produced the 8ft tusks plundered by the ivory traders will prove dominant once again. It is more encouraging that the elephant in Ruaha are still breeding enthusiastically and large number of female elephants around the park can be seen with babies. Their longevity and intimate social structure is complex and they have been proven highly intelligent animals. They show collective grief over death within their groups, often gathering around the dead elephant, and may try to carry the body away.

It remains surprising how the Ruaha elephant populations do not show great signs of nervousness around humans, considering the brutal culling that has occurred here.

When to visit

The climate in Ruaha is similar to the rest of Tanzania, but moves slightly towards a more Southern African pattern of 'single season rains', with the short rains in November being less distinct and the long rains of late March and May varying in intensity. The dry season between May and November is best for general wildlife viewing - as animals are centred around fewer water resources. However, birdwatchers and butterfly enthusiasts will find more to excite them in the months around the rains, between January and May. During the hot months of October and November the valleys of Ruaha are prone to dramatic lightening storms.