A VISIT TO LA PARC NIOKOLA KOBA IN SENEGAL

La Parc National de Nikola Koba lies on the River Gambie in south eastern Senegal, close to the border with Guinea in the south and Mali in the east. It was founded in 1954, while the country was under French rule, and covers an area of 8130 square kilometers (3100 square miles). Forty years ago the concept of a nature reserve was one where human beings were excluded, and accordingly all residents were relocated and a military style National Parc Guard installed. In 1990 the guard numbered 158, with one female - a new recruit! They are armed with pistols, automatic weapons and knives, necessary as three guards were shot dead last year by elephant poachers. During the dry season they live in several military camps in the Parc, along with the staff to service the hotels, airport and visitors camps. In the wet season much of the parc is inaccessible and only a skeleton guard remains.

The annual rainfall is 1200 mm (48 inches) falling from August to October, the rest of the year is completely dry with temperatures up to 45 C in the shade! The vegetation is mainly Guinea savanna with palms (*Borassus aethiopum*), *Acacia*, *Ficus*, *Combretum*, *Diospyros*, and isolated areas of dense bamboo, grass plains with the Gambie and a series of small lakes. Recently the rainfall in central Africa has decreased and since 1973 several of the lakes have completely dried up. In Januarry 1991 Lake Siminti was almost dry, five months before rain was expected. The lakes had provided water, grazing, and mud wallows for many mammals and birds. They are also a key tourist attraction, the fear is the meagre 4,000 visitors may dwindle and the government withdraw finance and abandon the national parcs. Our visit was to try to provide a means to maintain the water in the lakes by pumping water from the Gambie to Lakes Siminti and Wourin, but it also gave us a superb opportunity to observe and photograph the wildlife.

As dawn broke each morning, we breakfasted overlooking the river, hundreds of Guinea fowl rushed down for a drink, as crocodiles kept watch for the unwary. Suddenly an African clawless otter (*Aonyx capensis*) scampered across the mud bank and disappeared into the river, glossy ibis flew over and an african river eagle waited patiently in the trees. Hipppos (*Hippopotamus amphibicus*) drifted quietly by, with no hint of the fact that it was the mating season, until one morning we witnessed a dramatic fight between two males only yards away. Eventually, after much circling, grunting and lunging at each other, one male was joined by the female and together they drove the intruder away.

Lake Siminti and the surrounding bush gave us our best views of ungulates. On the dry lake reedbuck, *Redunca redunca*, was the most common. The males held small territories and harems of females. There were frequent displays and disputes as males tried to steal females, but often it was the female who initiated the changes, by suddenly rushing off and joining another group. Several males would give chase, chaos ensued, followed by a gradual reorganisation. The waterbuck, *Kobus defassa*, had a different social system. January was the nonbreeding season, when males form peaceful bachelor herds and the females and young adults were in another group. In the breeding season they pair rather than form harems. The hartebeest, *Alcelaphus buselaphus*, were very argumentative. The majestic roan antelope, *Hippotragus equinus*, was very shy and only seen in dense bush. Equally shy but much more dangerous was the african buffalo, *Syncerus caffer*. The tiny red flanked duiker, *Cephalophus rufilatus*, was seen most frequently scurrying across dusty roads and the delicately striped bushbuck, *Tragelaphus scriptus*, was seen in small family groups by the river or lake edge.

The second most common animal by the lake was the warthog, *Phacochoerus aethiopicus*, always accompanied by long tailed glossy starlings taking insects from their backs and around their feet.

Lake Wourin gave us a magnificent view of the amazing saddlebill stork and a pair of brown mongoose, *Mongos gambianus*, obviously enjoying a very bloody meal. As we returned a black mongoose, *Herpetes ichneumon*, crossed in front of our vehicle, then came 250 baboons, *Papio anubis*, and a flock of 1000 blue eared glossy starlings. Green monkeys, *Cercopithecus aethiops*, were seen near to the camp.

The african hunting dog, *Lycaon pictus*, though rare in most of Africa, is quite common in Niokola Koba and was seen several times at dusk near the airport. Another visitor saw a pack chase a bushbuck into the Gambie before giving up their pursiut.

And now for the things we nearly saw - the lions, *Panthera leo*, of Niokola Koba are the biggest in Africa and a pride was quite near to our camp. They were seen by several people, but after three days searching, the best we could do was a fresh footprint! Most of the elephants, *Loxodonta africana*, are in the eastern part of the park and closely guarded, but we did see prints of a lone elephant. We found a burrow of a crested porcupine, *Hystrix cristata*, and we saw damage to termite mounds which could have been caused by a giant pangolin, *Manis gigantea*, or an aardvark, *Orycteropus afer*. We made no attempt to identify small mammals but saw several squirrel like creatures - maybe next year!

Lesley Helliwell