

VIRUNGA:

Or Whatever Happened to Albert National Park?

By Burt A. and Susan Ovrut

Photos by the authors



Hippos wallow, flank to flank, in Virunga Park mudhole.

OUR DAY BEGAN, as so many previous days had begun, with the patter of rain on the roof of the Land Rover. We lay still, listening to the sound reverberating through our tin-can environment. For two weeks we had been adrift on the seas of mud, whimsically called roads, in eastern Zaïre, and were not eager to resume the battle with the elements. We were enroute to Virunga National Park, Zaïre's best known game preserve.

Located in the remote interior of Africa, Virunga Park has attracted few of the tourists who annually visit the more accessible game parks of Kenya and Tanzania. The park lies along the eastern edge of the Congo rain forest, a vast tropical jungle stretching its green canopy over much of equatorial Africa. Though it is readily ap-

proachable from the air, an overland journey to Virunga National Park is a safari through difficulties. Our enthusiasm for the trip had long since vanished in the mud and gloom of the Congo forest. What we did not know on that rain-soaked morning was that we were only a few miles from the edge of the jungle and an end to our troubles. Several hours drive from the campsite, the rain forest gave way with amazing abruptness to rolling, treeless grasslands.

No traveller is left unmoved by the knife-edged

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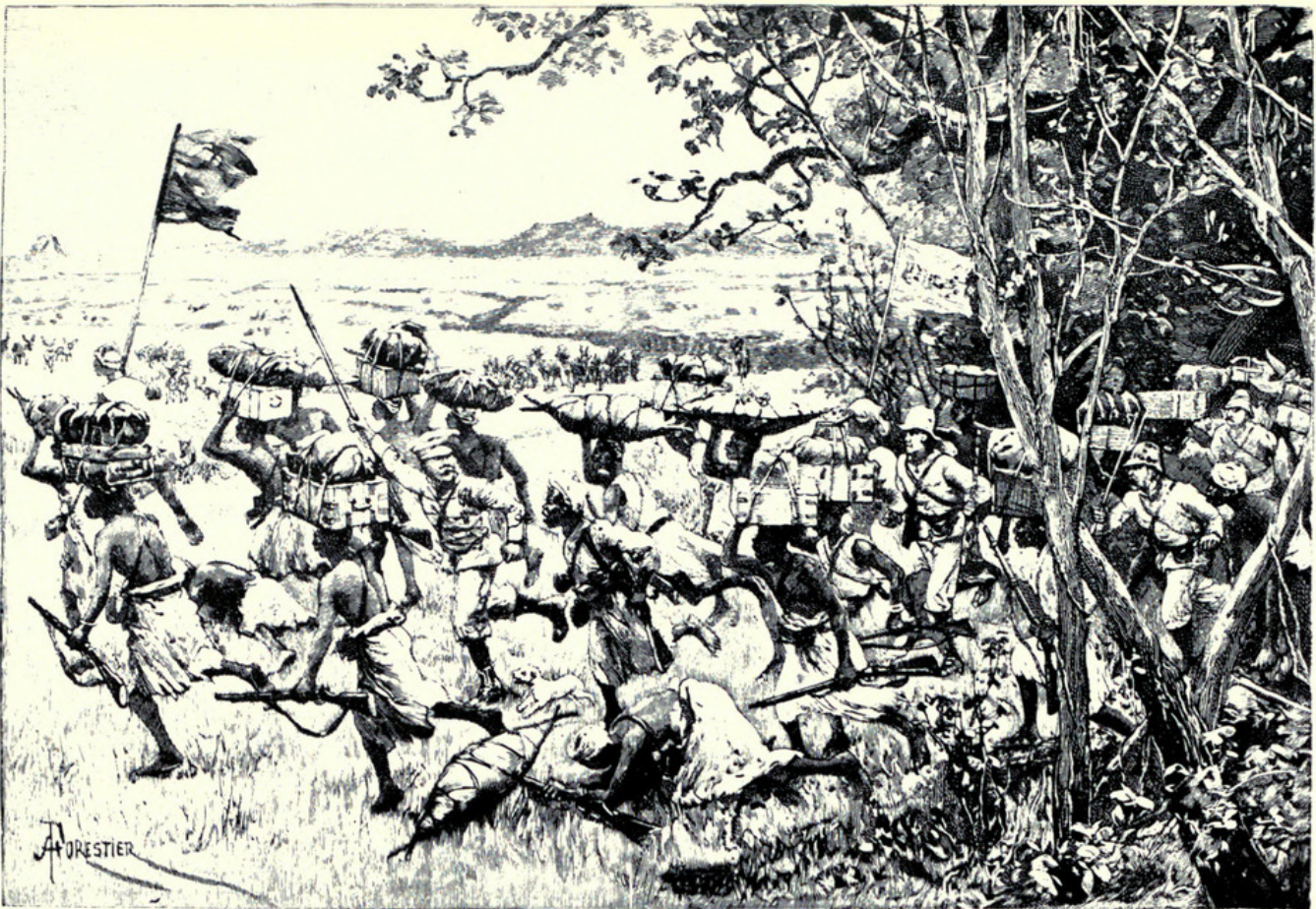
transition from jungle to grassland, from darkness to light, that takes place in eastern Zaïre. Henry Stanley, visiting the region in 1887, described his experience in emotional terms:

From the Ituri we entered a narrow belt of tall timber . . . then, to our undisguised joy, emerged upon a rolling plain, green as an English lawn, into broadest, sweetest daylight, and warm and glorious sunshine. . . . We strode forward at a pace most unusual, and finally, unable to suppress our emotions, the whole caravan broke into a run.

Our emergence from the forest was only a prelude of things to come. In a few hours we stood on the rim of the Western Rift Valley, enjoying one of the most beau-

tiful sights in Africa. On the valley floor several thousand feet below, stretching northward to the horizon, was Virunga National Park. Shafts of sunlight, breaking through the clouds, spotlighted herds of elephant, black buffalo and gazelle. Beyond the sun-lacquered surface of Lake Edward, the snowcapped Ruwenzori Mountains soared upwards to more than 16,000 feet. Far to the south, steam clouds spewed from Nyiragongo, an active volcano forming the park's southern boundary. The presence of volcanoes and thermal springs in the park gives a clue to the geological origin of the Western Rift Valley.

The African continent floats like a ship on the molten interior of the earth. Torn loose millions of years



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ago from its moorings to the Americas, Africa has steadily drifted eastward. The subterranean forces that pulled the continents apart have conspired, and may someday succeed, in the dismemberment of Africa itself. The continent has already been rent by two huge cracks. The westernmost of these is called the Western Rift Valley. It begins at Lake Malawi and cuts its way northward to the Sudan-Uganda frontier. Acting as a catch basin for heavy equatorial rains, the Rift Valley has become partially filled by four large lakes: in the south, Lakes Tanganyika and Kivu, and in the north, Lakes Edward and Albert.

Intense geological activity has formed a series of volcanoes, the Virunga Volcanoes, between Lake Kivu and Lake Edward. These act as both a hydrographical and political barrier, dividing the Western Rift Valley into two, distinctly different parts. In the southern valley is the Tanganyika country, a human and fluvial backwater. Here, nineteenth century ivory and slaving empires rose and fell; here at Ujiji on Lake Tanganyika, Stanley found the aging and disillusioned David Livingstone. In 1967 a rebellion, centered around the town of Bukavu on Lake Kivu, reasserted the traditional violence of the Tanganyika country. Lake Tanganyika is kept from becoming a stagnant inland sea by its slow drainage into the Zaïre River system via the Lukaga Channel. This channel is the only outlet from the entire southern Rift Valley and as such is sluggish and inefficient.

North of the Virunga Volcanoes, the Rift Valley has a completely different character. Water flowing into this part of the valley is destined, not for an African lake, but for the Sudan, Egypt, and, eventually, the Mediterranean Sea. In Virunga Park small streams coalesce to form the Rutshuru and Rwindi Rivers, the western sources of the Albert Nile. These rivers empty into Lake Edward which, in turn, drains northward into the Semliki River. Swollen by the runoff from the Ruwenzori Mountains, the Semliki is a river of major proportions by the time it flows out of the national park and into Lake Albert. When these waters finally leave Lake Albert they do so as the Albert Nile.

With its abundant water and open grazing land in the midst of dense jungle and rugged mountains, the Western Rift Valley attracted large numbers of wild animals. When the first Europeans arrived in the area in the late 1800s they found unparalleled concentrations of wildlife. Stanley took time out from his skirmishes with the natives to describe the teeming life on the shores of Lake Edward: "The river-like arms of the lake, now narrowing and broadening, swarmed with egrets, ducks, geese, ibis, heron, storks, pelicans, snipes, kingfishers, divers and other water birds."

The Western Rift Valley and the surrounding mountains were also the home of a rare animal—the mountain gorilla. Much of the ecological controversy that later surrounded the Rift Valley revolved around this

shy creature. The coming of white men to the eastern Congo meant the introduction of modern firearms and the beginning of the slaughter of wildlife. Accounts of early expeditions to the Western Rift Valley tell of the wholesale killing of some of Africa's most majestic animals, with the skin, the tail, or a single plume as the sought-after prize. The gorilla was an especially desirable trophy. In the early twentieth century, one book after the other photographically recorded the slaughter of gorillas. The carnage was so great that, by World War II, travellers in the eastern Congo reported not seeing any of these animals.

Such large-scale hunting might have led, as elsewhere in Africa, to the complete extermination of wildlife had it not been for a bizarre mitigating circumstance. This came in the form of the tsetse fly and the pernicious Gambian sleeping sickness that it carried. The disease is believed to have been introduced into the Western Rift Valley by porters in Stanley's 1887-1890 expedition. It spread rapidly along the Semliki River and the northern shores of Lake Edward. The impact on the health of the people and their cattle was so great that the valley floor was abandoned for the healthier Ugandan highlands. Attempts by Belgian authorities to repopulate the Rift Valley in the early twentieth century ended in tragedy. By 1920 most of those who had been resettled in the region were either dead or had been hospitalized.

But this confrontation between man and disease, disastrous as it was for humans, was a blessing for the wildlife of the area. It kept the pressure of human habitation and cattle grazing to a minimum. The wild animals, immune to sleeping sickness, had time to breed and replenish the herds. The balance between hunter and tsetse fly kept the animal population stable. When the Belgian government finally decided to establish game preserves, the Western Rift Valley was an obvious first choice.

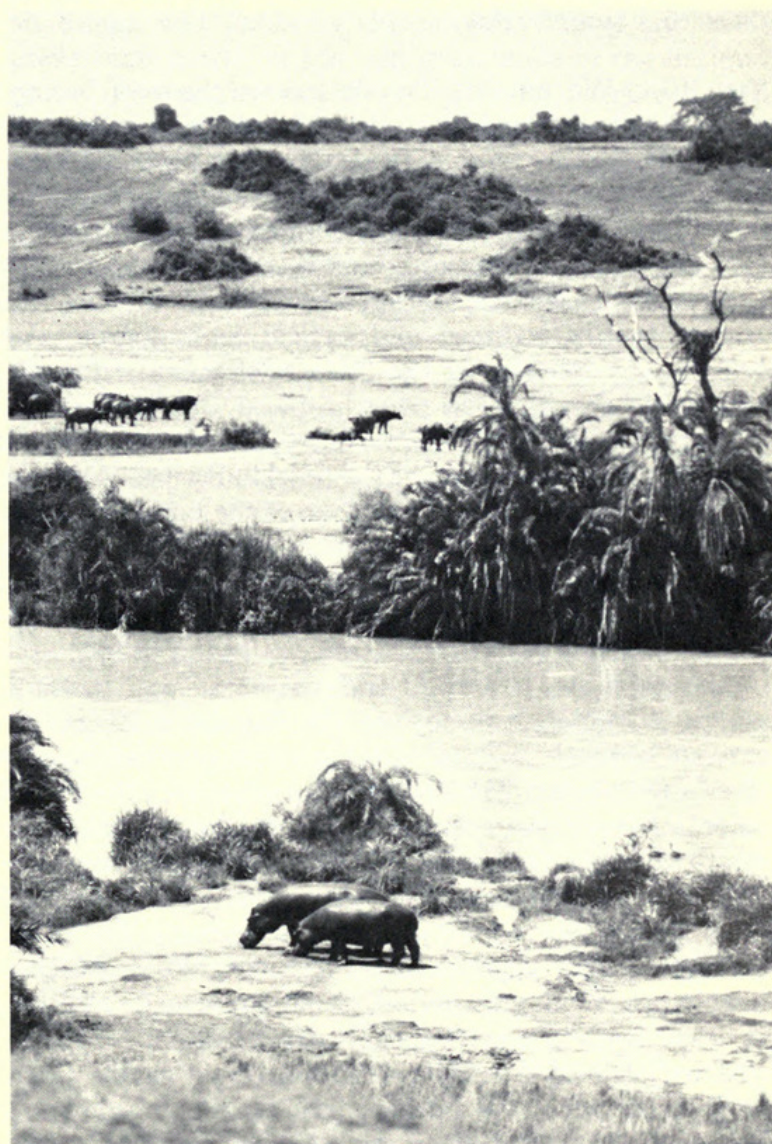
Mounting pressure from wildlife conservation groups began to have an effect by the middle 1920s. King Albert of Belgium visited America's Yellowstone National Park in 1919 and was favorably impressed. When conservationists, notably Carl Akeley* of the American Museum of Natural History, asked him to set up a gorilla preserve in the eastern Congo, Albert responded by establishing an extensive multianimal preserve in the Western Rift Valley. Albert National Park was created by royal decree in 1925. Successive decrees, up to 1935, added substantial areas to the original tract. The park today occupies nearly all of the Rift Valley floor from the northern shores of Lake Kivu to just north of the Ruwenzori Mountains, a little more than 8,000 square miles of varied terrain. Its confines include some of the Virunga

Volcanoes in the south and most of the 800 square miles of Lake Edward.

Eight peaks comprise the Virunga Volcanoes, the tallest of which, Karisimbi, rises to 14,782 feet. Their height and stark, basaltic appearance account for the generic name *virunga* which derives from a native term *kirunga*, meaning "high, isolated mountains that reach the sky." Two of the volcanoes, Nyamuragira and Nyiragongo, remain active. Both are within the national park's boundary. A spectacular eruption of Nyamuragira in 1912 was witnessed by Sir Alfred Sharpe:

All the country along the shore of Kabino was buried in black ash, the crops were destroyed, banana trees fallen, native huts partly buried or crushed flat . . . The roar from the volcano was incessant—a steady, deafening roar—and the whole country below us was

Hippos and buffalo at their leisure along the banks of Zaïre's Rutshuru River. African fish eagle nest occupies top of tree at right, across river.



* Carl Akeley also served as Field Museum's taxidermist from 1896 to 1909.

lit up by a column of fire lava, and red hot material, which was shot up many thousands of feet. . . . The whole of the water at the north end of Kivu was hot by this time, and many thousand fish were floating dead. . . .

Some idea of the fierceness of this outbreak while it lasted may be gathered from the fact that at the post of Walikali, in the Congo forest 100 miles to the west, ashes fell heavily for two days, while the eruption was heard at Beni 140 miles to the north. . . .

In December, 1976, and continuing for several months into 1977, both volcanoes were again in upheaval. Lava poured into heavily populated areas with devastating consequences.

Albert National Park survived the political turmoil that followed the Congo's independence from Belgium. In 1971 President Mobutu announced his Authenticity Program which, among other measures, changed the name of the country from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Zaïre, and africanized European-sounding place names. Albert National Park was given the African name previously applied only to its volcanic mountains. It was the Virunga National Park which lay stretched out before us on that summer day.

THE ROAD WOUND AND TWISTED down the steep escarpment, finally descending to the valley floor. A small sign indicated that we were entering Virunga National Park, but a sign was hardly necessary. It was obvious from the large herds of gazelle and black buffalo on both sides of the road that we were in a first-rate game preserve. In the distance, elephants foraged in a cluster of trees and crested cranes strutted and pecked among groups of impala. We drove on to the little settlement of Rwindi, the tourist headquarters in the park. Camping is not permitted in Virunga, and one must either leave the park boundary at night or stay at the hotel in Rwindi. Animals were everywhere, even at the door of the hotel. At night an elephant regularly came to scavenge from the kitchen and hippos bellowed from a nearby stream.

The next morning we hired the mandatory government guide and began our safari. Following the dictates of the guide, we drove off the main road and motored across savannah land toward the Rutshuru River. We arrived suddenly on top of a high cliff overlooking the river's west bank. The view was spectacular. The pastel colors of land, river, and sky seemed like a painting in which the pictured animals slowly moved. Grazing together on the meadow below were zebra, wildebeest, and topi. In the dense growth of papyrus lining the river, vividly colored tropical birds hopped from branch to branch like moving flowers. Every tree seemed to harbor at least one African fish eagle (*Haliaeetus vocifer*), a close relative of the North American bald eagle. These took to the air at our approach and, swooping down to the river, drew our attention to a remarkable pheno-

menon. Wallowing in the grey mud along the river bank were hundreds of hippopotami, already seeking in the mud relief from the hot morning sun. Virunga Park is famous for its estimated 30,000 hippos, a number far exceeding what would normally be expected in such an environment.

The Rift Valley was already overpopulated by hippopotami when the national park was founded. It was expected that their numbers would decline under the more normal ecological conditions created in the park, but this has not been the case. Today, in every river, lake, and almost every mudhole, one is sure to find hippos. By day they are either submerged under water, with just nostrils and ears protruding, or covered with mud, waiting for the sun to set. At night the hippos emerge from the water and, in tramping, crowded lines, range out over the savannah in search of food. Their incessant comings and goings cut deep tracks in the soft ground, evidence by day of the hippo's nocturnal adventures. We followed the Rutshuru River to where it empties into Lake Edward and visited the fishing village of Vitshumbi. Although found elsewhere in the park, crocodiles shun Lake Edward. This is at least partially responsible for the large number of fish found in the lake. During the lean years of World War II the Belgian government established a commercial fishery at Vitshumbi, much to the chagrin of the park authorities. Despite efforts by conservationists to prohibit it, commercial fishing still continues.

We arrived in town amid a flurry of noise and activity signalling the men's return from the morning fishing. After docking their dugout canoes or rough-hewn boats, the fishermen bring the catch to an open-air building. Here the fish are cleaned and weighed to the rhythmic chant of African work songs. There is no refrigeration at Vitshumbi, but the fish are fresh and the markets nearby. In the village beyond the fishery, the smoke of cooking fires rises up between conical straw huts with incongruously large marabout storks perched on the roofs. The storks lurk by the hundreds in the village, living off scraps from the fishery. On the beach, boats are repaired and nets mended, much of this work done by children. To our amazement, a battered and ancient elephant lumbered his way along the beach, accepting hand-outs of food. Nearing the end of his days, the elephant apparently felt more comfortable in the noisy, but benign, environment of Vitshumbi than in the wild savannah surrounding it.

In the full heat of midday, the animals retreated deep into the shade. Driving across a deserted savannah, we returned to the cool comfort of the hotel. Each succeeding day saw us exploring every corner of the park searching for, and finding, lions, topi, waterbuck, wart hogs, wildebeest, baboons, elephants, black buffalo, zebra, monkeys, and always the non-elusive hippopotamus.



Processing the day's catch at the Vitshumbi fishery.

The one animal we did not see was the mountain gorilla, the animal whose need for protection catalyzed the creation of Albert National Park. The existence of this great ape in the eastern Congo was surmised by Stanley in 1890 but no white man actually saw one there until twelve years later. In 1902 a German officer, Captain Oscar von Beringe, observed several interesting primates while climbing in the Virunga Volcanoes:

We spotted from our camp a group of black, large apes which attempted to climb to the highest peak of the volcano. Of these apes we managed to shoot two . . . [One of the two] was a large man-like ape, a male, about 1 1/2 m. high and weighing over 200 pounds. The chest without hair, the hands and feet of huge size. I could unfortunately not determine the genus of the ape . . .

Von Beringe's ape turned out to be a new species of gorilla, subsequently called *Gorilla gorilla beringei* in his honor. The common name, mountain gorilla, distinguishes the animal from a lowland cousin in western Africa. A general slaughter of the fierce-looking, but gentle creature followed its discovery. Collectors for museums alone killed more than 50 by 1925 and many were taken by amateur hunters. The gorilla was forced higher into the mountains and, as far as the tourist was concerned, disappeared from view. Even in the mountain retreat, the gorilla was not left in peace.

Outside the park boundary human encroachment on its territory was strong and unyielding. Armed with increasingly sophisticated tools, Hutu farmers in neighboring Rwanda began extending cultivated fields further

up the mountainsides, destroying the forest and vegetation necessary for the gorilla's survival. The ape's environment was further damaged by cattle, brought to graze in the high mountains by Watutsi herdsman. Incursions by cattle into the national park itself were frequent and Belgian authorities were not vigorous in maintaining the integrity of the park's boundaries. As a consequence, the ape population both outside and inside the park continued to decrease. A careful study of the mountain gorilla in 1960 concluded there were approximately 8,000 to 9,000 of them in the eastern Congo. Although this figure was larger than expected, it was considerably smaller than the number of mountain gorillas at the turn of the century. Since 1960, increasing human demands on the forest environment has resulted in a further decline of the great ape.

From their inception, the game parks of Africa have faced major threats to their continuance. A burgeoning human population, needing land for cultivation and pasturage for its cattle, presses relentlessly against the boundaries of wildlife preserves. The destruction of the mountain gorilla's habitat by the Hutu and Tutsi peoples of Rwanda is just one example of this pressure. In Kenya and Tanzania the pastoral Masai habitually graze their cattle on the rich grasslands of the national parks. The cattle tend to trample and overgraze their pasturage, quickly reducing it to wasteland. This situation is exacerbated in times of drought when the presence of artificially maintained waterholes in the game parks induces more frequent visits by Masai herdsman. With their own waterholes dry and their cattle dying, it is difficult for the Masai to respect park boundaries which are, very often, marked only on a map.

An even greater threat to wildlife preserves is posed by illegal hunting. Most parks do not completely encompass the migratory routes of their fauna. As a result; many wild animals spend part of each year outside protective confines. There, they fall prey to poachers who, near Serengeti alone, kill more than 40,000 animals annually. Every season, when the herds return to the national parks, it is in smaller numbers.

With the exception of the mountain gorilla, and in spite of large-scale poaching during the turbulent post-independence period, Virunga National Park has been successful in protecting the many animals within its boundaries. Well managed, the park continues to flourish. Masters of the prehuman world, coequals with agricultural man, the wild animals of the earth now find themselves corralled into small enclaves such as Virunga Park, saved temporarily by the tourist dollar from total extinction. Whether or not they can survive the onslaught of man and machines remains for future generations of Africans to decide.

Whatever happened to Albert National Park? So far, it is alive and well as Virunga National Park in eastern Zaïre.



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