



Alan Birks

Wild Life in Southern Sudan

by Stephen Cobb

Stephen Cobb



An aerial view of the Pibor river in Buma National Park, southern Sudan. This is one of the tributaries of the Nile and part of the Nile floodplain which contains some of the richest habitats for birds and mammals in Africa.

Southern Sudan contains some of Africa's last true wilderness areas teeming with wildlife —largely unspoiled because of their inaccessibility.

Here Dr. Cobb, already well-known to SWARA readers, introduces us to the problems and potentials of the region.

If numbers impress you, southern Sudan has to be an impressive place. The topi herds of Jonglei, the white-eared kob of Buma are numbered in the hundreds of thousands; the water birds of the Nile floodplain in the millions. No country in Africa other than Tanzania matches it for abundance of wildlife; few match it for diversity. Why then have we not all been there? In this article I shall try to explain the background to wildlife conservation in southern Sudan, the problems that face it, the attempts that are being made to overcome them and finally, the future prospects, both for the animals themselves and also for people to see them.

For seventeen years the people of

A Grasshopper Buzzard. This is perhaps the commonest bird of prey in the grasslands of the Nile floodplain.

southern Sudan were locked in a bitter civil war, that was ended, in a spirit of reconciliation with the north of the country, in 1972. Elsewhere in East Africa, those were not an ordinary seventeen years. In that time, Tanzania, Uganda and then Kenya all gained their independence. More or less simultaneously, all three of them began to develop extensive networks of National Parks and Reserves. These became well known places throughout the world and the publicity, particularly through television films, kindled large quantities of donations and a vigorous tourist industry. Southern Sudan could not be developed and was forgotten by the conservation world. Can it now be developed and is it still being forgotten?

The geography of the country is at the same time the biggest ally of the wildlife, the greatest obstacle to its orderly conservation. The greater part of the country is a huge, flat floodplain. For seven to eight months of every year this is underwater, or, hardly better, a sea of black mud. Nor is there as much as a pebble for road making. Ground transport is therefore virtually impossible, though a small network of almost-all-weather roads is gradually taking shape across the country. This very inaccessibility in part explains the profusion of wildlife: except between the months of January and April, it has been virtually impossible to get at it to ravage it. By the same token, it has been difficult to set up, maintain, keep fed, and keep paid a reliable network of wildlife outposts throughout the National Parks and Reserves of the country. But progress is being made, despite these physical difficulties and one other problem of major importance. Southern Sudan is virtually without visible exports. This will not always be so, for oil in highly attractive quantities has been found in the Nile floodplain and surpluses from a number of agricultural schemes should ultimately be forthcoming. But up till now, there has been a critical shortage of foreign exchange: there is simply no money to buy vehicle spares, ammunition and other things essential to keep a wildlife department going. Fuel is always in critically short supply (it is not legally for sale to the private buyer anywhere in southern Sudan).

Despite these difficulties, the Wildlife Department is buoyant and enthusiastic. It is headed, at its smart Juba offices, by a Director, Fraser Tong, and his Deputy Director, Henry Minga. The legal basis of what they do is a thoughtful and wide-ranging "Wildlife Conservation and Parks Act, 1975", which has been added to a number of times since, particularly

as new areas have been brought under the conservation umbrella, or as others move up the status ladder towards National Park. Getting the bureaucratic side of things sorted out has evidently been a long battle: but it only goes half of the way to getting animals, plants and places conserved. Translating the generalities of the law into sensible management policies for each area, has been something that the wildlife department has been slowly coming to grips with, despite the colossal logistic problems that face them. It is at this point that aid projects have come into play.

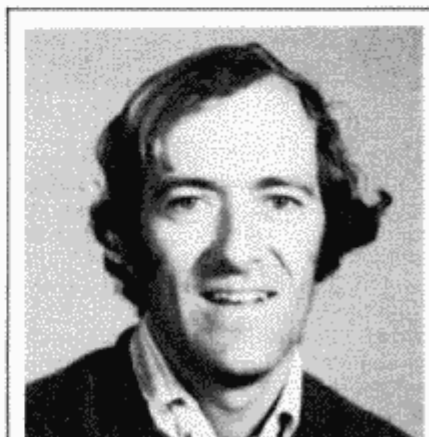
The first of these has been the Sudan Wildlife Conservation Project, funded since late 1976 by the Frankfurt Zoological Society, and consisting of one man, Peter McClinton, his German-born wife Anna, an aeroplane and a Mercedes Unimog. With the logistic support of German Technical Aid, they have provided much-needed support when the Wildlife Department has faltered, for lack of fuel, lack of spares and so on. They have helped the Department crystallise its plans for several of the new National Parks and Reserves, their transport versatility being a big boon in this respect. They have also acted as a catalyst for other conservation organisations deciding whether or not to give assistance to southern Sudan.

Another important and recent development has been the setting up of a Wildlife Department in the College of Natural Resources and Environmental Science at the University of Juba. This is headed by Dr. Malte Sommerlatte (also German-funded), who has previously worked on wildlife conservation problems in Europe and Botswana. Not many countries in the world have their University curricula so sensibly organised. There will soon be a bunch of graduates who, it is hoped, will be well equipped to put the country's conservation policies into practice in the field. At this stage, one cannot be but optimistic.

The African Wildlife Leadership Foundation, of Washington and Nairobi, has started to get a Conservation Education Programme going. Sandy Price, AWLF's Nairobi Director, will be visiting Sudan regularly to lay the foundations of the education network. Just what balance will be struck between a system of Wildlife Clubs of the pattern she so successfully initiated in Kenya, latterly adopted by Uganda and Tanzania and an attempt to get a message to other strata of Sudanese society, has not yet been finally decided. AWLF also plans to help by making its aircraft, a Cessna 185, available for conservation work in

southern Sudan on a semi-permanent basis.

Another major contributor to southern Sudanese conservation efforts is the New York Zoological Society. They have two areas of interest. The first is in Bangangai, a small forested game reserve on the Zaire border, where last year Dr. Chris Hillman (whose study on the eland in Kenya was largely funded by EAWLS) started research. The area has a high diversity of forest primates and also contains a high density of bongo, on which Chris Hillman is concentrating his studies. His presence there will lead to management plans for the area and possibly the creation of a National Park. The other area where NYZS is involved is in Buma National Park, up against the Ethiopian border. In a project that is overseen by Dr. David Western (formerly a Director of EAWLS) and Dr. Tony Sinclair of the University of British Columbia (whose work on the Serengeti buffalo and wildebeest populations is well known), a young Canadian graduate student, John Fryxell, is trying to piece together the story of the population dynamics and migrations of the white-eared kob, whose numbers in Buma challenge those of the Serengeti and Masai Mara wildebeest. This research will be used as a foundation for Park management and boundary proposals. With the generous aid of the Frankfurt Zoological Society, Buma National Park is about to come under the management of Phil Snyder, who for the past ten years



Dr. Stephen Cobb, a former Director of the East African Wild Life Society, is currently the Project Director of the Jonglei Research Project in southern Sudan. This project involves research on the population dynamics and migrations of the tiang (a close relative of topi) of which there are about half a million in Jonglei. He is also working on Sudan's endemic antelope, the Nile Lechwe. Dr. Cobb was formerly a lecturer in Wildlife Ecology at Nairobi University and has done research in Tsavo National Park, Kenya. (see SWARA, Vol. 3, No. 4).



Alan Binks

For numbers and diversity of wildlife Buma National Park is second only to the Serengeti. This aerial photograph is of White-eared Kob whose numbers probably exceed one million.

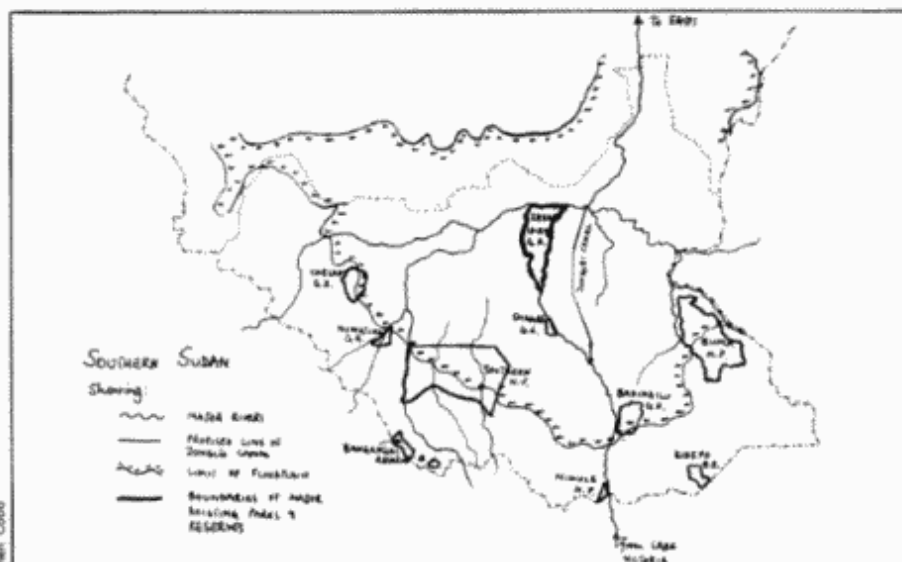
has been Warden in the Mount Kenya and Aberdares National Parks in Kenya. He will have at his disposal the AWLF plane as well as vehicles provided by Frankfurt.

The Italian Government, not well known for its interest in international wildlife conservation, has just completed a biological survey of the Southern National Park. This has been led by Dr. Luigi Boitani, vigorous conservationist and ardent wolf biologist from Rome University. He was assisted by, amongst others, Alfredo Guillet, who had previously spent two seasons sitting in the Sudd, studying the elusive shoe-billed stork. This work will also lead to management proposals which in turn, it is hoped, may be put into action with Italian Government money.

Shambe is a small reserve in the floodplain on the west bank of the Nile and it contains some of the few remaining northern subspecies of the White rhino. Dr. Kes Hillman, until recently the leader of the NYZS/WWF/SSC African Rhino Project, is in the throes of raising money to develop Shambe into a larger National Park, to equip it and to instal an ex-East African Park Warden to develop it. In addition she hopes to do her own research there on the biology of the White rhinos, all of this as a part of the coordinated African Rhino campaign.

The last wildlife-oriented project to be considered here is the one with which I am involved. Southern Sudan's biggest current development project is the construction of the Jonglei Canal. With funding from the European Development Fund, our team is examining some of the potential effects on the ecology of the area, with a view to finding ways of overcoming the detrimental ones, capitalising on the beneficial ones. Thus a group of eighteen people, some part-time, some full, is looking at the ecology and productivity of the grasslands; at the productivity, seasonal migrations and diseases of the livestock of the Dinka, Nuer and Shilluk people of the area; at the water resources; and at the wildlife population ecology.

It is possible that the sloth with which the development of the management of southern Sudan's wildlife resources has taken place may act to its advantage. There is no doubt that an assortment of mistakes have been made in the management of wildlife in the rest of East Africa over the last twenty years. If the conservation world at large is wise enough to learn by its mistakes, then the southern Sudan has plenty of mistakes to learn by. In particular, I have in mind the relationships between National Parks and the local people. Several of the Parks and Reserves have large human populations either living within them, or using them seasonally. Their legitimate rights to grazing and to space should not be forgotten. This matter relates closely to another, the question of traditional hunting by these same local people. There is a rather enlightened law in southern



Sudan, permitting the hunting of certain species of wild mammal, provided that neither dogs nor unlicensed firearms are used in the hunt. To the Murle of Buma and the Dinka of Jonglei, the successful hunting of kob and tiang (topi) respectively, is a major source of protein. Finding ways of legally exploiting this resource, under some degree of control, is a challenge that must be taken up. Another challenge is to find ways of allowing people as well as wildlife access to grazing resources within protected areas. Failure to do this at the outset will surely only lead to long-term, deeply-felt resentment of the wildlife conservation authorities. Such suspicions have been entrenched elsewhere in Africa; it is encouraging to think that they may yet be avoided in Sudan.

While many aspects of the development of conservation in southern Sudan are thoroughly encouraging, a touch of reality would not go amiss. For the last six months or so, an elephant war has been raging in Balir el Ghazal Province. Large, heavily armed gangs, mounted on camels, have moved in from Dasfir Province to the north. Enormous numbers of elephants have been killed, and pitched battles with under-equipped

government forces have taken place.

What are the chances for an outsider of ever seeing any of southern Sudan's wildlife? Tourism, in the form of sport hunting, is an expensive option that is already available, through a couple of Juba-based and a number of Nairobi-based organisations. For those whose interests are more pacific, or whose pockets more thinly lined, there is either a long wait, of several years, before tourism gets off the ground, with all the necessary things that tourism entails, like hotel accommodation, vehicles for hire, fuel and food to buy, or there is the option of organising a safari oneself, starting somewhere where these things are available. In effect this currently means Nairobi. It should be between January and April, for certain access, and one should bear in mind the fact that fuel cannot be bought on the open market.

Southern Sudan is a country where things tend not to happen very quickly. It is thus unlikely that the status of its wildlife is going to change all that rapidly. This is just as well for those many people who are getting together now, to try to assure its future. It is certainly a resource that is worth a great deal of assuring.