Uganda – Field Report

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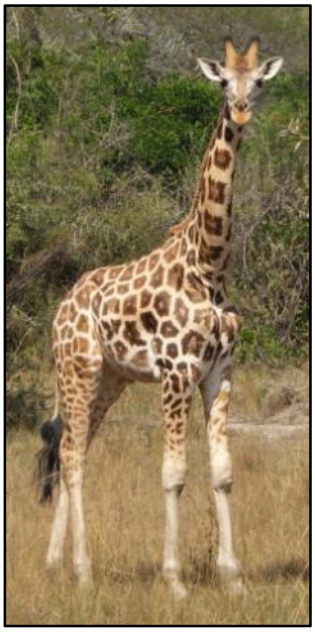
In July, I (Andrea Bryant) had the opportunity to join the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) in Uganda for two weeks to assist with population surveys of the endangered Rothschild's giraffe (*G. c. rothschildi*). Upon arrival in Entebbe, I met up with Dr. Julian Fennessy, Conservation Scientist and Executive Director of GCF and Michael Butler Brown, PhD Student at Dartmouth College, studying the population ecology of Rothschild's giraffe at Murchison Falls National Park. After loading up the GCF research vehicle with supplies, we drove to our first destination on the trip, Lake Mburo National Park in south western Uganda.

Michael & Julian at the Boma, Lake Mburo NP

Giraffe had previously been absent from the Lake Mburo ecosystem for up to 100 years. Just prior to our arrival, 15 giraffe (four males and eleven females) had been translocated from Murchison Falls National Park to Lake Mburo National Park by the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA). The goal of this translocation was to establish a new giraffe population and expand the range of Rothschild's giraffe in Uganda. We had hoped that some of these giraffe would still be contained in the translocation boma, but when we arrived at the park, we learned the giraffe had been released a couple days earlier. So…the search was on to locate and photograph the Park's newest arrivals and help to set up a monitoring protocol.



Male Rothschild's giraffe

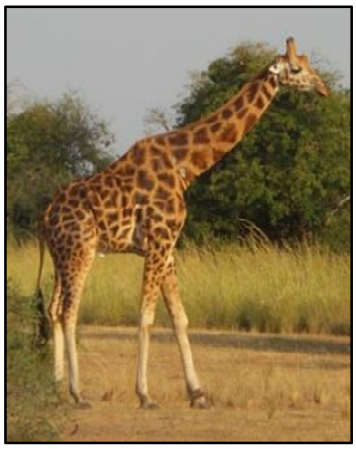
Lake Mburo is home to large herds of impala, zebra, buffalo, bushbuck, waterbuck, eland and warthogs, amongst other species. By lunch time on our first full day in the Park we had spotted and photographed six different giraffe in two different groups (the first group consisted of one male and three females, the second group was made up of one male and one female). All of the giraffe appeared to be in good physical condition except for one of the males who was favoring his left front foot and had a swollen fetlock – we spotted him again the next day and he already showed improvement.

On day two in Lake Mburo we spotted a lone young female giraffe that we had not seen the previous day. As she calmly approached what had been an intermingled herd of zebras and buffalo, the zebra grouped together and moved off, while the buffalo formed a tight group facing the giraffe. A subset of this buffalo herd charged toward the giraffe, presumably in an effort to chase off the new arrival. When the giraffe did not react, half of the buffalo continued to run past her to the safety of the bushes beyond, while the others turned back to rejoin the main herd. Apparently the local wildlife are unsure what to make of their new long-necked neighbors!

The photographs taken of the translocated giraffe will be used to set up a 'citizen science' program to monitor the population. A booklet and poster with giraffe ID pictures will be created so that rangers, guides, lodge operators and tourists can take pictures of the giraffe they see in the Park and determine which individual it is. Additionally, these photographs, along with information such as date and location, can be uploaded to a database that will help UWA and GCF record how often individuals are seen, where they are spending their time, and who they tend to associate with. All of this information provides insight into giraffe behavior, social structure, and ecology that can be used to inform giraffe conservation and translocation decisions in the future for Lake Mburo and other areas. Both UWA and the lodge operators are excited to be a part of this new initiative.

Murchison Falls

After two full days at Lake Mburo NP, we began the long drive along red dirt roads to Murchison Falls National Park, located in north-western Uganda. This Park is home to the largest remaining wild population of Rothschild's giraffe, with over 900 individuals already having been photographed by Michael. At Murchison Falls, we were joined for a few days by Tom and Kathy Leiden of the Leiden Conservation Foundation, Kristen Lukas, Director of Conservation and Science at Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, Liz Fowler, Executive Director of the Cleveland Zoological Society, and two zoo supporters.



Male giraffe with snare wound

An afternoon cruise on the mighty Nile River provided a great introduction to the Park's wildlife, including hippos, elephant, buffalo, giraffe, fish eagles, kingfishers, bee-eaters and of course, the Nile crocodile – plus a great view of the falls. After spending the night at the student center, and watching a hippo walk by within 30 feet of us while loading up the car, we spent a full day driving around the Park. Our mission was to photograph any young calves that were unlikely to already be in the database and to take note of how many giraffe we came across with snare wounds or skin disease, two issues seen within the Park. Of the ~200 giraffe we saw over the course of the day, we found only one bull with an obvious snare wound around its front left fetlock. Skin disease on the other hand is much more prevalent. While it is yet to be determined what causes giraffe skin disease, its current impact on the animals themselves appears to be purely cosmetic.

Our final destination of the trip was Kidepo Valley National Park, located in far northern Uganda and bordering South Sudan and Kenya. Here our group was joined by Dr. Doug Bolger, Professor of Environmental Studies at Dartmouth College, Stuart Nixon, Field Programme Coordinator at Chester Zoo, Sarah Roffe, Team Manager of giraffe at Chester Zoo, Sheri Horiszny, Director of Animal Programs at Santa Barbara Zoo, Isaac Mujaasi, UWEC and Tom & Kathy Leiden, Leiden Conservation Foundation. For four solid days, we loaded up in three vehicles, each driving a different loop within the Park, to conduct the first-ever on the ground survey of the giraffe population and photograph as many unique individuals as possible. Every morning as we set out, we picked up UWA rangers to collaborate with us in the field. These men proved invaluable in guiding us to great vantage points within the Park and were often the first ones to spot groups of giraffe out in the distance. Their knowledge of the Park allowed us to track the giraffe so that we could get close enough to photograph them. By the end of the week in Kidepo Valley, we had photographed ~25 individual giraffe. Once the images are compiled and run through a pattern recognition

software program (Wild-ID), we will be able to determine exactly how many individuals were spotted. Just like in Lake Mburo, GCF is planning to set up a 'citizen science' project to monitor the Kidepo Valley giraffe population and provide additional data to UWA to understand the giraffe population dynamics and determine why the population does not appear to be growing, despite the seemingly abundant resources.

Sam (UWA Ranger) & Andrea

After four days searching for giraffe in Kidepo Valley National Park, it was time to begin the long journey back to Entebbe and home to the USA. While I did not want this adventure to end, it was amazing to be a part of GCF's work to conserve Uganda's endangered Rothschild's giraffe and see these beautiful animals in their natural environment. I know that in the future I will return to Africa, but in the meantime I will share my knowledge, experience, and passion of giraffe with people at home to continue to raise awareness of the challenges these animals currently face.

Kidepo Valley National Park

Thank you to Julian and Michael for allowing me to join them in the field and making this experience unforgettable! Additionally, a huge thank you goes to Cheyenne Mountain Zoo's Docents, AAZK Chapter, and Animal Department, as well as to Auckland Zoo, Blank Park Zoo, Care for Karamoja, Chester Zoo, Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, Cleveland Zoological Society, Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, Dallas Zoo, Freunde Hauptstadtzoos (Tierpark Berlin), Total, Leiden Conservation Foundation, UWA and UWEC, for your financial and/or technical support of this trip. The support is invaluable!