

RUAHA NATIONAL PARK

Written by Administrator

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At 13,000 sq. km, it is the second largest Tanzanian park and one of the wildest. It is also the world's largest elephant sanctuary.

"There is not a blade of grass here in the dry season", says Kenyan Wildlife sculptor Rob Glen about Ruaha National Park, his home for the past two years. This is difficult to believe once the rains have started and the Great Ruaha River is swollen to a mighty torrent strong enough to drag an adult hippo downstream. Glen, like watercolour artist Sue Stolberger, has special permission from Tanzania National Parks (TANAPA) to live in the country's second largest National Park. Both camp alongside the northern bank of the river, and are actively involved in the conservation of the spectacular and abundant wildlife upon which they base their work.

The park represents a transition zone where eastern and southern African species of fauna and flora overlap. It is the northernmost example of miombo woodland, common in central Africa, and the most southerly protected area in which Grant's gazelle, lesser kudu and striped hyena are found. To be able to see both greater and lesser kudu and roan and sable antelope in the same park is one of the special attractions of Ruaha. In the dry season, the river is an excellent place for observing large numbers of game including lions, leopards, hunting dogs, giraffe, waterbuck, eland and warthogs. Thousands of birds flock to Ruaha on their annual migration from Europe to Asia, and 465 bird species have been sighted in the park. The park's residents include kingfishers, plovers, hornbills, green wood hoopoes, bee-eaters, sunbirds and egrets.

Britain's bilateral aid programme to Tanzania is funding a project to prepare a management plan for the Ruaha ecosystem, and to 'direct benefits from wildlife' to the communities living in the game-controlled area, or 'buffer zone', adjacent to the park. Hunting by tourists and local residents goes on inside the area, explains project leader Dawn Hartley, as well as some poaching by the latter, "so its conservation presented a complex problem for the wildlife authorities". Work carried out so far includes assisting four villages to establish wildlife committees, select their own game scouts and organise meat utilisation schemes.

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Access is by road. The best months for game viewing are July and November when the animals are concentrated around shrinking water holes. During the rest of the year the tracks are almost impassable.

Camping is permitted at various sites including around the park headquarters at Masembe. There are bandas equipped with beds at the headquarters. Essentials except food and drink are provided. There is also a lodge and a tented camp.