



The newsletter of the Nyika-Vwaza Trust and Nyika-Vwaza (UK) Trust
"working for the environment and wildlife conservation in northern Malawi"

Welcome to the Spring 2013 issue of Nyika-Vwaza News.

Birds and orchids take centre stage in this issue. Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire, co-author of "The Birds of Malawi", provides a fact-filled insight into the lives of some of the Nyika's forest birds. Isobyl la Croix, co-author of "Orchids of Malawi", offers an equally instructive guide to the *Disa* orchids of the Nyika.

We are incredibly lucky to have these contributions from the leading authorities in their fields. Both articles are compelling in their own right. Equally, though, they serve as a reminder of the rich biodiversity that we, with your support, are seeking to conserve, along with Malawi's Department of National Parks and Wildlife and our other partners, on the Nyika and at Vwaza.

In our final feature, Lorna Hobson returns to Malawi after an absence of over 40 years. While her pleasure in the flora and fauna is obvious, it is the warmth of Malawi's people that really illuminates her article. A love affair was reignited in May last year and you cannot fail to be captivated by Lorna's story!

An important development in the UK was the launch last November of the Foot Educational Fund. To protect a nation's natural heritage for the benefit of future generations is one of the main functions of conservation. An important way to achieve this is through education. The Foot Educational Fund will support conservation programmes and visits to the Nyika and Vwaza by young Malawians, from children at primary school through to undergraduate students. The Fund is financed **entirely** from donations from you. You can read more about it below.

As always, we thank you for supporting us and hope that this newsletter encourages you to continue to do so.

With best wishes,

Jane Gallacher (Editor)

"One Land Rover, Two Lawyers, Three Years – Our 70,000 Mile Journey Through Africa"

At our 2012 lecture, held at The Royal Geographical Society on 6 November 2012, Jerry Kent and Lisa Holyhead gave an illustrated account of their marathon travels across Africa. This included their recollections of their time as volunteer managers for the Nyika-Vwaza Trust in Malawi back in 2009. Jerry's photographs were stunning and captivated the audience – one person was overheard saying it was the best evening he had had for years! After the talk, Jerry and Lisa were presented with a watercolour painting of a Bar-tailed Trogon by Malawian artist, David Kelly, in recognition of their services to the Malawi Trust and as a thank you for giving the talk.

The evening also marked a "thank you and farewell" to Harry Foot who, as Secretary and Treasurer of the Nyika-Vwaza (UK) Trust, guided it from its earliest beginnings until last year when he retired. Lady Toulson, our Patron and the first Chairman of the UK Trust, gave a warm speech of appreciation. She also presented Harry with a carved walking stick made with wood from the Nyika's Juniper Forest. This had been hand-carved by Shadreck Mfune, who was "very chuffed" to be doing the work for Harry. We also said farewell to Claire Grimshaw, who retired as a Trustee after eight years' service.

Nearly 200 people attended the RGS evening, including His Excellency Mr Bernard Sande, the recently appointed High Commissioner for Malawi, and four colleagues from the Malawi High Commission. We were delighted that they, and so many of our other friends and patrons, were able to join us to show their support for our work and their commitment to conservation in Malawi.

Our thanks go to the staff of the RGS, in particular Denise Prior, and to all those who helped in the organisation of the evening, including our regular helpers Donna Wilson and Pippa Hayes.

Foot Educational Fund launched

In honour of the contribution made by Harry Foot and his family to the Trusts in the UK and Malawi, the RGS evening saw the launch of the Foot Educational Fund. Through funding it will provide to existing organisations in Malawi, it will promote increased awareness, particularly among the children and young people of Northern Malawi, of the environmental and ecological issues facing the Nyika National Park and Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve. By funding field trips and bursaries, as well as mounting exhibitions, film shows and other activities, the rich biodiversity of these areas, and the need to conserve them, will be highlighted.

The UK Trust launched the Fund with a contribution of £2,500. Since then, we have received other donations of nearly £4,000, including one of £500 from the Trustees of the Miss G M Marriage Will Trust. We are enormously grateful to our supporters for their overwhelming generosity in getting the Foot Educational Fund off to such a flying start. If you would like to support it, there is more information on our website which you can find at www.nyika-vwaza-trust.org and then click on Support Us/Foot Educational Fund or you can contact Peter Lawrance 50 Brewery Road, Woking, Surrey, GU21 7NA, Email: sec.nvt@gmail.com or Tom Lupton Email: tomlupton@btinternet.com.



Harry Foot giving his farewell speech at the RGS

The private lives of some Nyika birds, based on ringing studies

In this issue, Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire - Nyika-Vwaza (UK) Trust Patrona Naturae, eminent ornithologist and co-author of "The Birds of Malawi" (2006) - offers our readers a fascinating glimpse into the private lives of some of the Nyika's forest birds. These insights are the result of ringing studies conducted by Françoise and her husband, Robert Dowsett, on the Nyika in the late 1970's and early 80's.

Françoise and Robert lived in Malawi from 1979-84, spending three years on the Nyika studying the ecology of montane forest birds. This was followed by a year based at Chikangawa, exploring the evergreen forests of the north, and a year based at Mulanje, exploring those of the south. In the latter two years, they visited virtually all patches of evergreen forest in Malawi, conducting studies of birds, vegetation, mammals and butterflies, as well as examining conservation issues. They have visited Malawi at irregular intervals since then.

I first visited the Nyika Plateau in November-December 1977, coming from Livingstone in Zambia with my future husband Robert Dowsett. Our dream was to come and live in this beautiful place one day, and this dream came true in 1979 (thanks to research grants from Belgium), when we settled for nearly three years, first staying at the Zambian rest house then at Chilinda.

Our aim was to study the ecology of montane forest birds and the influence of fragmentation of the forest habitat on the distribution, turnover and movements of birds. With a great range of patches of different size, some more isolated than others, the Nyika seemed an ideal field laboratory. This was in part to be based on the ringing of as many individuals as possible. Ringing was started on the Zambian side by John Tucker in August 1972, was carried on in December-January 1975-76 by Robert Dowsett, and in 1977 we started to use colour rings for individual recognition of birds. In 1979-82 ringing operations were concentrated in Chowo forest (in a 25-ha section) and in a dozen patches in Zovochipolo fairly close to the Zambian rest house, on both sides of the international border. We were able to control our ringed birds again on shorter visits in 1983 and in October 1986. Many of the controls were done without recapturing the birds, as these often become net-wary and it was quicker and easier to call them up with a tape of their own song and check colour-ring combinations visually.

From 1972 to 1982, 2030 forest birds of 33 species were ringed. The amount of information we learned from this was enormous, including on longevity, territorial fidelity, the size of territories, breeding success of individual pairs and the proportion of non-breeding individuals or "floaters". For the best-studied species, the figures of annual mortality appeared to be very low, from 13-22% only for White-chested Alethe (*Alethe fuelleborni*), Olive-flanked Robin (*Cossypha anomala*), Starred Robin (*Pogonocichla stellata*) and Cape (Malawi) Batis (*Batis capensis dimorpha*). In 1986 at least one bird was still alive from the first ringing session: this was a Yellow-streaked Bulbul (*Phyllastrephus flavostriatus*) from Chowo, ringed as an adult in 1972, thus at least 15 years old. He was identified thanks to his unique combination of colour-rings. Many other birds were visually controlled on our last visit in 1986, including a Starred Robin ringed as a full adult in 1975 thus at least 13 years old (Starred Robins in their first year have a dull, olive plumage, they acquire the adult plumage at the age of two years). Average annual survival and life expectancy are indeed considerably higher in tropical species than in the temperate zone: thus of nearly a million European Robins (*Erithacus rubecula*) ringed in Britain, the oldest ever is only eight and a half years old.



Olive-flanked Robin
© Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire



Female Cape Batis
© Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire

The identification of individually-recognized birds sometimes gave us some unexpected insights into the birds' private life. One story that I find particularly interesting in terms of territorial fidelity is that of a female Cape (Malawi) Batis who lived, in 1975-1977 at least, in a small patch of forest just above the Zambian rest house. This patch was seriously degraded by logging (staff from the rest house had to take their firewood where they could), and by October 1979 the territorial male had disappeared, presumed dead. I found the colour-ringed female attached to a new male in a nice big round patch (one ha in size) at the road junction, 350 m distant. In early November a subadult male appeared in the first (deserted) patch, upon which (no later than early December) the old female had left her new mate and returned to the Zambian side to pair with the young newcomer. She then successfully raised two young. Thus she preferred a small, degraded patch that was familiar to her than a larger, apparently better one but which was unfamiliar.

Another of our favourite old birds was a male Greater Double-collared Sunbird (*Nectarinia afra*), "red-green" (as for his colour rings), who lived around the Zambian rest house for a number of years. He was first ringed (as an adult) in January 1976, colour-ringed on a later date and was still alive in January 1983: this male had the same ringed female for several years, which did not stop him from chasing her around like a mad thing before the start of the breeding season. If these birds had not been known as individuals, we would have assumed that this aggressive behaviour at pair formation was due to the novelty; not at all, after a period of sexual rest, he was just renewing acquaintance with his old mate.

Starred Robins are partial migrants, with all adult males and some immature males staying year-round on the Nyika, the adults occupying the same territory until they die. It is the females who move away, thus relieving pressure on scarcer

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

food resources in the cold, dry season. An important wintering site for the species was the warmer forests of the Malawi lake-shore near Nkhata Bay, now much decreased through deforestation. Ringing studies again showed that 18 of 20 known breeding females in Chowo and at least 24 of 36 in Zovochipolo returned to the same territory from one year to the next, most pairing again with the same male, some with a replacement of their previous mate. Even non-breeding individuals are pretty site-faithful. Until they can find a breeding territory they survive as best they can at the margin or at the boundary of two territories, and as soon as an old breeding bird disappears, the nearest "floater" takes its place.



Forest patch No. 3, in Zovochipolo
© Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire

The White-chested Alethe is a rather specialized kind of thrush that feeds almost entirely on small arthropod prey flushed by army ants. They breed only where they find enough food around an active ant nest and some territorial birds never bred in the three years we watched them in Zovochipolo. One was "yellow-blue", an adult male who owned the big round patch of forest at the road junction referred to above (and that we called No. 3); in all this time, ants never moved into this patch and so he never had a chance to breed. Across the road and opposite No. 3 was a rectangular patch of similar size (No. 4) with an active nest of ants, and there was another round patch just east of it across 50 m of grassland (No. 5)

without any ants. The pair of alethes owning No. 4 bred successfully throughout the period, so did the pair in No. 5, although they had to cross the grassland every time as they came to feed around the ant swarm. As soon as their two young fledged all four birds used to cross the grassland to feed in No. 4, but they had a lower position in the hierarchy. In April 1981 an eminent American professor (Edwin Willis) came to the Nyika to study ant-following birds, as he had done much work on ant-following species in the American Tropics. He spent many hours in patch No. 4, only metres away from the birds as he was standing right in the ants, patiently picking off the soldier ants climbing up his long pale socks. He was able to study the social position and pecking order of the various alethes in attendance, as most were colour-ringed: the territorial owners were of course dominant, using the best perches closest to the food supply, and the adults were dominant over the immatures.



Starred Robin (adult)
© Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire



White-chested Alethe. This is adult male "yellow-blue", who owned forest patch No. 3 for at least three successive years, but never managed to breed there in the absence of army ants. He used to feed at the ant swarm in patch No. 4 across the road.

© Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire

The few examples above show how instructive it is to be able to recognise birds individually, and it is only through long-term studies that important discoveries have been made on the population dynamics of birds, such as territoriality, longevity, turnover rates, breeding success and the proportion of non-breeding floaters. All of this has important implications for the conservation of forest birds. Very few similar studies have taken place elsewhere in the Afrotropics, the main one being that of André Brosset and Christian Erard in NE Gabon (Makokou), over a period of 20 years. Unfortunately their full data on population dynamics were never published.

Further reading

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Dowsett-Lemaire F. (1989). Ecological and biogeographical aspects of forest bird communities in Malawi. *Scopus* **13**(1): 1-80.

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Dowsett R.J. & Dowsett-Lemaire F. (1984). Breeding and moult cycles of some montane forest birds in south-central Africa. *Rev. Ecol. (Terre & Vie)* **39**: 89-111.

Willis E.O. (1985). East African Turdidae as safari ant followers. *Gerfaut* **75**: 140-153.

Our thanks to Françoise for her insights into the lives of some of the Nyika's forest birds. It is many years since she and Robert conducted their ringing studies and, as far as we know, there have been no further studies of this kind. This is sad. As Françoise's article illustrates, long-term studies of individual birds can yield significant new findings that could be important for their conservation.

Disa orchids on the Nyika

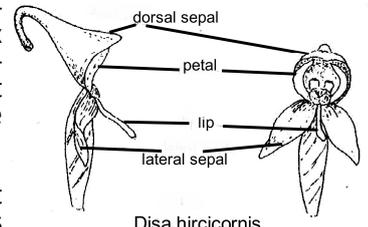
Isobyl la Croix is a botanist who lived for ten years in Malawi and is an acknowledged expert on the country's native orchids. She is also a *Patrona Naturae* of The Nyika-Vwaza (UK) Trust. Many readers will recall that *Isobyl* has already written an article for us to highlight the great diversity of orchid species that can be found on the Nyika (readers of the electronic version of this newsletter can view that article on the Articles page under News via the trust website at: www.nyika-vwaza-trust.org).

In this new article, *Isobyl* offers a guide to the 22 species of *Disa* orchid that have been recorded on the Nyika. Her text is accompanied by photographs of most of these species, taken by her husband, the entomologist *Eric la Croix*.

Disa is a large genus of about 160 species. Apart from one in Arabia and five in Madagascar, they all grow in continental Africa, with by far the most in South Africa. Twenty-six species are known from Malawi and of these, 22 have been recorded from the Nyika National Park. They are charismatic plants. Many have big, showy flowers that always attract attention, so I thought it would be useful to give brief descriptions of these and illustrate as many as possible.

Disa species occur in various habitats. Most are plants of montane bog and dambo, but several grow in montane grassland while a few are plants of open woodland and others grow among rocks.

How do *Disas* differ from other orchids? Many orchids have flowers with spurs, but these are always almost on the lip; *Disa* is one of the few genera where the spur is formed by the dorsal sepal. The dorsal sepal forms a hood at the top of the flower. In some species the hood is shallow, with the spur arising about halfway up, while in others the hood is conical, gradually tapering into the spur. The petals lie inside the hood, and the lip is usually small.



Disa hircicornis

Disa hircicornis anatomy



Disa erubescens
© Eric la Croix

One of the showiest species is *Disa erubescens*, which is widespread in bogs and wet grassland. The large flowers are vermilion red, with the inside of the hood and the upper petal lobe yellow spotted with red. The spur on the back of the dorsal sepal is upturned. There are two subspecies that differ mainly in size of flower. The species that used to be known as *D. stolzii* is now correctly named *D. erubescens* subsp. *carsonii*. *Disa ornithantha*, which also occurs in wet grassland and dambos, differs in that the spur is pendent, the dorsal sepal has a shorter claw, and the petals are white rather than yellow. Both these species flower from January to March.



Disa ornithantha
© Eric la Croix

Disa ukingensis grows in montane grassland at altitudes of over 2,100 m. It has a dense inflorescence of large magenta-pink to purple flowers in March and April. In the past it has been confused with *Disa engleriana* but plants in flower are easy to tell apart. The latter has a much looser inflorescence and the habitat is very different. It grows in open woodland at altitudes of 1,280–1,700 m and flowers from February to April. On the Nyika, it grows in the Chisanga Falls area. The flowers of *Disa*

zombica are similar in shape to those of the last two species, but the floral bracts, although variable in size, are longer than the flowers. The flowers are also variable in colour, a mixture of green and purple, but in some plants they are more green than purple, others are the other way round. This species is not common on the Nyika, but sometimes occurs in montane grassland at about 2,300 m and also in scrubby woodland at lower levels, about 1,300 m. The flowering time is January to April.



Disa ukingensis
© Eric la Croix



Disa engleriana
© Eric la Croix



Disa zombica
© Eric la Croix



Disa ochrostachya
© Eric la Croix



Disa satyriopsis
© Eric la Croix

Any visitor to the Nyika in January and February must have seen the tall golden candles of *Disa ochrostachya* scattered over the montane grassland. Plants grow up to 1 m tall and the flowers are yellow dotted with red; they are only about 1 cm across but are densely packed on the spike. Occasionally plants occur in montane bogs where they flower earlier, usually in October. *D. satyriopsis* is very similar and flowers at the same time but the flowers are salmon pink spotted with red. It is less common than *D. ochrostachya*, but still quite widespread. It grows usually in drier areas of montane grassland at altitudes of 1,980–2,380 m.

The densely packed, vibrant carmine red flowers of *Disa welwitschii* are among

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

the most vividly coloured of any orchid. According to literature, the colour can be variable but all those I have seen have been of this vivid colour. It grows in bogs and poorly drained grassland and flowers from December to February. *D. miniata* is in the same section of the genus but is less showy as the long bracts partly hide the flowers. The flowers are vermilion red with a club-shaped spur. It occurs as scattered plants in dambos at 1,250 – 2,400 m. *D. celata* has a slender spur but is otherwise rather similar. It has only been collected once in Malawi in a bog at about 2,200 m.



Disa welwitschii
© Eric la Croix



Disa miniata
© Eric la Croix



Disa robusta
© Eric la Croix

Disa robusta has large flowers of a very different shape to those previously described. The dorsal sepal forms a deep hood that tapers gradually into the spur, reminiscent of the “jellybag” hats that were all the rage for a while when I was at school. The inflorescence is dense, with up to 20 red or orange flowers with darker spots, although there are often fewer. It grows in damper areas of montane grassland, at the edge of dambos and on seepage slopes at altitudes of 1,500 – 2,000 m and flowers between November and January, usually in December. *D. caffra* is a related species with large pink flowers, but it has only been collected once on the Nyika many years ago and I have never seen it. The habitat is described as montane bog, at about 2,300 m. Still, it is worth mentioning it here in case it should appear again.

Disa hircicornis has flowers of a similar shape but much smaller. However this is more than compensated for by their extraordinary colour, deep purple with a grape-like bloom.

Again, I have read that flowers can vary in colour but all the specimens I have seen in Malawi have had these rich purple flowers. It is widespread in bogs and dambos, occasionally in damp grassland, at altitudes from 1,100 to 2,300 m, flowering from December to February. *D. perplexa* is very similar but has greyish-mauve flowers and purple bracts. It occurs in montane bogs at 1,900 – 2,300 m and flowers mainly in December and January.



Disa hircicornis
© Eric la Croix



Disa perplexa
© Eric la Croix



Disa equestris
© Eric la Croix

Disa equestris is a beautiful species, again with flowers of an unusual colour. The sepals are deep violet-blue, the petals and lip are white edged with purple and the ovary is maroon. We have only found it in one place on the Nyika, in a boggy area of montane grassland at 2,250 m. It flowers in December and January.

Disa aconitoides subsp. *concinna* is a slender plant with white, lilac or mauve flowers with purplish spots and an erect, sac-like spur. It grows in a range of habitats – montane grassland, edge of dambos and open woodland, usually between 1,100 and 1,900 m, but occasionally up to 2,200 m. It flowers in December and January. *D. nyikensis* is rather similar, the flowers are mainly greenish-lilac with purple spots. The main difference lies in the spur, which is more slender than that of *D. aconitoides* and is bent at about half way. It grows in montane grassland at 2,100 – 2,400 m and also flowers in December and January. The species was described from the Nyika, but it is also known from southern Tanzania.



Disa aconitoides
© Eric la Croix



Disa saxicola
© Eric la Croix

The epithet *saxicola* means ‘rock-dwelling’ and this is an appropriate name for *Disa saxicola*. This little species usually grows among rocks and in crevices at altitudes from 1,600 – 2,400 m, also sometimes on seepage slopes in montane grassland. The flowers are white or pale pink with purple spots and a purple spur, opening from January to March. *D. rungweensis* is a strange little species that is easy to overlook. The flowers are yellow-green or pinkish-purple with an erect spur swollen at the tip. It is not common, I have only seen it near the Chilinda river at about 2,300 m. It grows in seepage areas among rocks and flowers from February to April.



Disa rungweensis
© Eric la Croix



Finally, to the species that is perhaps more commented on than any other – the ‘blue Disa’, *D. baurii*. The colour of the sky blue flowers is difficult to capture on camera – at least on film, perhaps digital cameras catch it better. The petals are greenish and the deeply fringed lip is usually a darker blue. The spur curves upwards. It grows in dry areas of montane grassland from 1,900 to 2,300 m, and flowers in September and October before the rains begin so that the flowers really stand out against the bare soil. Strangely, there are at least two colonies on the Nyika that consistently flower between April and June. This species has had several name changes. It was originally described as *Disa baurii*, but was moved to a separate genus, *Herschelia*. This was then changed to *Herschelianthe*, but DNA work has shown that it really does belong to *Disa*. Some older books list it as *Disa hamatopetala*. It has two close relatives that also grow on the Nyika but are much less common. *D. longilabris* has white to violet-blue flowers with a horizontal rather than upturned spur and the lip is shorter and less deeply fringed. It flowers in September in montane grassland at

Disa baurii
© Eric la Croix

(Continued from page 5)

about 2,200 m. *D. praecox* has pale to deep sky blue flowers, smaller than those of *D. baurii*, and the lip is either entire or with only a few fimbriae. It flowers even earlier, in late August to September, appearing soon after burning in montane grassland at 2,000 – 2,350 m.

Tubers of *Disa* have long been dug up for food by local people but in recent years this has been happening on an industrial scale in some places, with lorry-loads being sent to markets, usually in Zambia. It is to be hoped that on the Nyika their flowers will always continue to brighten the landscape.

Further reading

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We are very grateful to Isobyl for this comprehensive and detailed guide to the Nyika's Disa orchids, gorgeously illuminated by Eric's photographs.

Isobyl's article ends on a dark note. Both subsistence and commercial poaching of Malawi's native orchids is a serious conservation concern. Evidence obtained by Malawi's Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) suggests that Disa and Satyrium are the main genera under threat. DNPW is acutely aware of the problem. It has prosecuted a number of poachers; for example, we understand that 30 people were arrested for suspected orchid poaching in 2012. However, resources for anti-poaching patrols are limited and even successful prosecutions often result only in a sentence of a few weeks of community service.

We are hoping, in the coming year, to work more closely with DNPW on further initiatives to tackle this very serious issue. If you would like to find out more, please contact Peter Lawrance 50 Brewery Road, Woking, Surrey, GU21 7NA, Email: sec.nvt@gmail.com or Tom Lupton Email: tomlupton@btinternet.com .

Showing the way – how signposts help!

In most issues of Nyika-Vwaza News, we update you on various activities that have taken place on the Nyika and in Vwaza over the previous six months. This time, in a departure from the norm, we report on just one particular project...

Each year, the Nyika-Vwaza Trust assists the Department of Parks and Wildlife with park biodiversity and infrastructure projects. One of these projects is the renewal and maintenance of direction signs.



Carpenters priming the new Thazima Gate information board

Direction signs are set up in strategic positions throughout the Nyika National Park and Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve. In addition to indicating travel routes and distances, signs are used to provide general information, such as the one at the Nyika National Park entrance. They are also used to label sites of special significance. There are over 60 sign centres, featuring over three hundred wooden signs. Many of the Nyika signs are attached to stone plinths, while at Vwaza they are mounted on timber poles. Inevitably the paint and woodwork weathers. In addition, in Vwaza, elephant damage is common, although we are currently looking at altering the way in which signs are displayed to reduce this.



NVT supervisors measure up the Vwaza March entrance signs for replacement.

All signs are given impact through template carved lettering relief. The brand includes our trademark green and gold colouring. In 2012, we have created a new look display pole, featuring a carved tip and routed green and gold bands, as shown in the photograph below.

(Continued on page 7)

(Continued from page 6)

Expenditure on this project in 2012 totalled £933, comprising the direct cost of materials, labour and transport and allocated overheads.

We thank the Trustees of the Miss G.M.Marriage Will Trust for their kind donation towards the costs of this project in 2012.



This sign at the Thazima Gate entrance is held in place with our newly branded poles

The direction signs project is a clear demonstration of how far your money can go in Northern Malawi. In the UK, how much would it cost to erect just one signpost in one of the UK's national parks? In Malawi, for a little under £1,000, we assist DNPW through the annual maintenance and replacement of direction signs across nearly 4,000 sq km of national park and wildlife reserve. Direction signs are an important part of the infrastructure of the Nyika and Vwaza, since they provide essential navigation for visitors to the parks and give them the opportunity fully to explore these areas, so enhancing the quality of their experience.

New Nyika plant checklist on website

Jonathan Timberlake, a trustee of The Nyika-Vwaza (UK) Trust, who works at the Herbarium at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, updates us on the latest addition to the Resources portal on our website.

As part of our efforts to make the Nyika Vwaza Trust website a portal for information on the Nyika and Vwaza areas, a comprehensive checklist of the plants found on the Nyika plateau is now available (see www.nyika-vwaza-trust.org and click on Resources). This checklist covers all the ferns, conifers and flowering plants recorded from both the Malawian and Zambian portions of the Nyika Plateau above 1800 m altitude and was compiled from a magnificent book by John Burrows and Chris Willis produced under the Southern African Botanical Diversity Project (Plants of the Nyika Plateau, SABONET Publication no. 31, SANBI, Pretoria, 2005). This excellent and well-illustrated publication is also available from the web at <http://www.sabonet.org.za> (click on Publications/Summaries and Downloads Report 31) and in a printed version from SANBI in Pretoria. It provides a comprehensive account of botanical exploration of the Nyika, a profile of all known plant collectors, and brief descriptions of all species, many of them illustrated with line drawings.

A total of 1927 species are listed (111 ferns, 5 gymnosperms, 1811 flowering plants, including 205 orchids). The 46 Nyika endemics or near-endemics – that is species found only on the Nyika and sometimes also on adjacent mountains – are indicated.

Malawi revisited

Two years ago, articles by Robin Gray about living in Northern Malawi reawakened a host of reminiscences for Lorna Hobson, some of which she shared with us in the Autumn 2010 Newsletter (see the Articles page under News at www.nyika-vwaza-trust.org). Since then, she has dreamed of returning to the country that caught her in its spell as a young teacher. Encouraged by Alan, her trusty and adventurous travel companion, she pored over dusty old maps and planned an itinerary taking in all the places and people she most wanted to see. Here is her trip report...

Our trip, in May 2012, was quite wonderful. Malawi exerting its magic on us just as it had on me forty-odd years ago. I was expecting a lot and I was not disappointed! I knew not to expect significant advances in people's wealth or standard of living, except in the prevalence of the internet and mobile phones, and the ubiquity of public transport. We knew, of course, of the devastating effect of HIV/AIDS. What had not changed, however, was the warmth and welcome of the people. To my delight, so much was exactly as I remembered. And, of course, we arrived at an interesting time, with the so-recent change of government and a new cautious optimism in the air.

I had kept in touch with the families of some of my ex-students. One such dear family insisted on meeting us at Lilongwe airport and seeing us off again, giving us hospitality in the heart of their community in the Central Region. Another young woman took us visiting her relatives in the townships around Blantyre and accompanied us on our visit to Soche Hill Secondary School (where I had taught her father in 1968).

One of the places I most wanted to re-visit was Mt Mulanje. I was so happy that Alan had his first sight of it just as I had

(Continued on page 8)

(Continued from page 7)

done - sitting on the back of a pickup truck as it bumped along the dusty road to Likhubula, the mountain's sheer cliffs glowing in the sun beyond the intense green of the tea plantations. We had a truly exhilarating four days, staying in the remembered huts and accompanied by two enthusiastic lads as porters who were keen to point out flora and fauna to us. Interesting conservation work was being carried out there, mainly to try to protect the Mulanje cedar.



Mulanje - Alan & porters at start of ascent.



Mulanje - Midday clouds near Ruo Basin



Mulanje trail near Ruo basin

From there we headed north. Before we left the UK I had contacted Walije Gondwe in London, having got to know of her educational charity, *Vinjeru*, from *Friends of Malawi* a few years ago. She had given us contacts in Mzuzu and kindly invited us to stay in her home in Erukweni. We spent a couple of days walking round villages in the area, seeing schools which have benefited from *Vinjeru*. It was gratifying to see serviceable books, desks and chairs donated by schools in England being put to good use – but discouraging to see heaps of defunct computers and outdated lab chemicals languishing in store cupboards. And, in spite of the overall impression of a hard life for people picking a living off a depleted soil, the area was, like so many, teeming with community self-help initiatives and AIDS-awareness campaigns.



Soche Hill - My 1968 home revisited



South along Lake - looking back

We hired an elderly but serviceable Pajero in Mzuzu and used it to drive along the impressive 'new' road up and over the escarpment, plunging down the South Rukuru valley before sweeping north along the lakeshore. This is one of the roads Robin Gray wrote of working on. It totally transforms the experience of travelling between Rumphu and Chitimba, which used to be a long tedious ascent to Livingstonia followed by the famous Gorode, the dramatic road of hairpin bends from Khondowe to the lakeshore. Now, on the new tarmacked and more direct road, such journeys seem shorter and we spent a day visiting old haunts of mine at Chilumba, including the secondary school, where we were given the red carpet reception.



Vwaza Marsh - Elephants seen from the chalet

We also made use of the car to thread our way between bikes and potholes to the Vwaza Marsh Wildlife Reserve, where we had a marvellous two days. Isaiah was our cook, creating ingenious and tasty dishes, and also looked out for us when we wandered too far from our chalet. From our konde, we watched herds of impala and kudu grazing, what seemed like endless processions of elephants lumbered past to cross the river, while baboons with their young clinging to them strolled inquisitively close. Godwin Kayamba was a fascinating guide with whom, together with Canaan, our armed ranger, we explored the reserve,



Vwaza Marsh - Lorna and Godwin at Vwaza

noting hippo tracks by the shore, observing experimental tsetse fly traps, learning about the uses of various plants and the variety of wildlife supported by the terrain. Godwin spoke enthusiastically of the dams being made by the Nyika-Vwaza Trust to help conserve water for the hippos, who nightly lulled us to sleep with their snorts across the waters of Lake Kazuni . . .

(Continued on page 9)

(Continued from page 8)

Having returned the car and back at Rumphi, we negotiated transport to the Nyika with some difficulty - a half-promised ride on a timber truck having failed to materialise. We found a *matola* in the bus station bound for Nthalire which we took as far as the Thazima gate. There, through the kindness of the Nyika-Vwaza Trust managers, Geoff and Patsy Wooles, an NVT driver, Joseph Mhone, on an errand to collect maize, gave us a lift for the other half of the journey to Chilinda. We were welcomed into the Wooles' home for tea, with scones and honey. Then we erected our tent at the campsite, surely the most beautiful spot in the Chilinda area, which we shared with grazing bushbuck – and thieving ravens!



Nyika - Early morning mist



Nyika plateau

All the Chilinda staff, Peter, Alwyn, Sam and others, welcomed us warmly, told us about the place and asked us about Scotland. Last but not least were the ranger and porter, Chippie and Lazarus, with whom we spent three tremendous days hiking across the plateau, marvelling at the wealth and beauty of the Nyika flora. We also enjoyed views of distant game on those rolling grasslands, roan antelope, eland, zebra, warthogs, kites; pitched our tents in the wild; exchanged stories with our two Malawian companions round the campfire; and, on the third day, arrived at Livingstonia.



Nyika hike - Lazarus, Chippie and Alan



Nyika hike - N. Rhumphi River



Nyika hike - our second camp

We spent a day exploring this fascinating old mission station and now university town (which I barely remembered) and the Manchewe Falls (which I remembered with great clarity from 1967 when a VSO colleague fell sixty feet into a rock pool, was rescued by villagers, carried up the almost sheer escarpment in a blanket slung under a pole – and miraculously lived to tell the tale!). Then, we found ourselves at Lukwe - a permaculture project which also provides eco-friendly chalet accommodation. So fascinated were we by this place (where tree-planting has arrested erosion, fertility has been increased through skillful animal and plant husbandry and the water-table is actually rising through water-entrapment) that we stayed an extra day. It seems to be one of a number of small-scale projects around the country and gives us hope for the possible more wide-spread restoration of forests and fecundity to rural Malawi.



South along Lake -ride in canoe

Then began a three-day trip along the lakeshore. We took an assortment of vehicles down the hairpin bends of the well-remembered escarpment road and from Chitimba as far as Mlowe (where the road ends) and spent a day there waiting in vain for a half-promised boat to Tcharo. Next morning we set off on foot along the lakeshore through countless villages, camping halfway at the Tcharo Health Centre. That whole trip was a heart-warming experience in itself: so many exchanges of greetings as we walked (both my Chichewa and Chitumbuka phrases have never entirely left me); stops to make introductions and explain our business; people who wanted to escort us on our way for a mile or two; and, best of all, the lad whom we encountered on our last day halfway through the hot weary afternoon, who offered us a ride in his dug-out canoe for the remaining few miles to Ruarwe. Bliss! At Zulunkhuni River Lodge, we relaxed for three days and visited a small community-centred educational project *Phunzira*, manned mostly by energetic young British volunteers. The dear familiar creaking 'ilala' then called and took us south down the lake to arrive at Chipoka the day before our flight home.



South on the Ilala - on deck

Thus ended a truly memorable trip and the realisation of a forty-year dream - though the dreaming goes on! . . .

N.B. All photographs in this article are by either Lorna or Alan.

To make a donation now please go to www.nyika-vwaza-trust.org and click on the Donate Now button shown above.

Readers' corner

Mammals of Africa

Mammals of Africa is a series of six volumes that describes, in detail, every currently recognized species of African land mammal. This is the first time that such extensive coverage has ever been attempted, and the volumes incorporate the latest information and provide detailed discussion of the morphology, distribution, biology and evolution (including reference to fossil and molecular data) of Africa's mammals.

Mammals of Africa recognises 1,116 species and 16 orders of mammals. Africa has the greatest diversity and abundance of mammals of any continent in the world. The reasons for this and the mechanisms behind their evolution are given special attention in the series. Among its many attributes, *Mammals of Africa* is also designed to act as an authoritative database for conservation policy and the rational management of future changes in the status of mammals and their environments. Each volume follows the same format, with detailed profiles of every species and higher taxa. Every species profile also includes a pan-African distribution map. The profiles are written by 350 authors, each an expert in their own fields, and the series is edited by six editors as detailed below. Two of these editors are David and Meredith Happold, Patronae Naturae of The Nyika-Vwaza (UK) Trust. There are many drawings and colour illustrations by Jonathan Kingdon, and line illustrations by Meredith Happold.

The details of each volume are:

Volume I: *Introductory Chapters and Afrotheria [hyraxes, elephants, manatees, otter-shrews, golden-moles, sengis and Aardvark]*. (eds. Jonathan Kingdon, David Happold, Thomas Butynski, Michael Hoffmann, Meredith Happold and Jan Kalina).

Volume II: *Primates*. (eds. Thomas Butynski, Jonathan Kingdon & Jan Kalina).

Volume III: *Rodents, Hares and Rabbits* (ed. David Happold).

Volume IV: *Hedgehogs, Shrews and Bats* (eds. Meredith Happold & David Happold).

Volume V: *Carnivores, Pangolins, Equids and Rhinoceroses* (eds. Jonathan Kingdon & Michael Hoffmann).

Volume VI: *Pigs, Hippopotamuses, Chevrotain, Giraffes, Deer and Bovids* (eds. Jonathan Kingdon & Michael Hoffmann).

Mammals of Africa is published by Bloomsbury Publishing in London. It is sold only as a full set of six volumes. The cost is £550 (£600 after 31 May) although discount sets are available through any of the authors and editors. For more information, see <http://www.issue.com/bloomsburypublishing/docs/moaissuu>.

Wind on the hills

"Wind on the hills" (ISBN: 978-1-904244-86-8; price £25.00 (hardback)) is the personal story of Roger Cartwright, who trained as a forester in the UK and Africa.

Roger's book begins with his early life in the 1950s and his experiences of the old rural ways of life in the Hampshire village where he lived. These experiences led him to train as a forester and he spent time in this role in Somerset's Quantock Hills. However, National Service intervened before Roger could complete his forestry training with the Forestry Commission in Perthshire and Gloucestershire. The second part of the book is about living his dream of becoming a forester in Nyasaland (now Malawi) and gives graphic descriptions of his life as a forester and naturalist in this beautiful, and then little known mountainous country.

This book will appeal to people interested in the countryside, wildlife, forestry and green issues and personal stories of colonial history in Africa.

Legacies

Leaving a legacy is one of the easiest ways to make a gift to charity and is a good way to make a significant donation and help secure the charity's long-term future. Please consult your solicitor on making a will or to make an adjustment to include The Nyika-Vwaza (UK) Trust, or alternatively visit the "Remember a Charity" website for a step-by-step guide at: <http://www.rememberacharity.org.uk>. If you decide to include The Nyika-Vwaza (UK) Trust in your will, we would be grateful if you could inform us of your decision.

The Nyika-Vwaza Trust can only continue with the vital task of helping to conserve the Nyika and Vwaza Marsh with the continuing support of generous donations. We welcome further donations from current Friends of the Trust but we also endeavour to widen our scope for funding so please pass on copies of the newsletter to your friends and relations.



Serious fun at Chilinda!

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