

TRAVEL KENYA

On the lookout for the ghosts of Tsavo

Only eight 'big tuskers' roam this vast national park today, but there's hope of a recovery, writes **Catherine Marshall**.

"Where are the elephants?" asks guide Ngamba Malingi.

There they are, outlined flimsy as ghosts behind a dust cloud rising from the desiccated plains of Tsavo East National Park. Their trunks caress the branches of an acacia tree festooned with weaver birds' nests. I point to them, victorious.

"Small tuskers," Malingi says, peering through his binoculars. "You would immediately notice it – their tusks are like fingerprints."

It's the renowned big tuskers of Tsavo we're hoping to see, elephants whose tusks weigh more than 50 kilograms each and are often so pendulous they drag along the ground. Of the Tsavo Conservation Area's 16,000-strong elephant population, just eight fall into this category. Decimated by generations of trophy hunters, their gene pool is being kindled in their few remaining descendants, known as "emerging tuskers" and "iconic girls".

"The emerging tuskers [of which there are 27] are younger individuals, but carrying very impressive ivory. We think, give them time and space – say five years, 10 years – they'll be the next super tuskers of Tsavo," says Joseph Kyalo, chief conservation officer with the Tsavo Trust, an NGO established in 2012 to protect and conserve big tuskers.

"The iconic girls, their ivory will never weigh more than 50kg because they're normally slender. Currently, there are five with slender but really long tusks."

Those mirage-like "small tuskers" are striking, nonetheless, their tusks not insubstantial, their hides stained brick-red by the laterite soils ribboning this terrain. Elsewhere, I see elephants mimicking the park's alternate hues: pale grey where they've lumbered across chalky steppes,

black where they've wallowed in soggy cotton soil.

At dawn, a herd files silently towards the waterhole outside my tent at Satao Camp; some wear sooty socks, others cloaks of tar. Their luminous tusks – prized by poachers and ivory collectors in far-off countries – are mottled with mud. In the dry season, a thousand elephants might gather here each day, along with a multitude of other wildlife.

The elephants' ubiquity is a miracle of sorts, the result of conservation efforts by organisations like the Tsavo Trust, Kenyan Wildlife Service and Sheldrick Wildlife Trust.

The immensity of the Tsavo Conservation Area necessitates a common vision and pooling of resources; encompassing Tsavo East and West National Parks, Chyulu Hills National Park and other landholdings, this expanse represents almost half of Kenya's protected areas. Poaching has declined dramatically, but human-wildlife conflict is an ongoing problem.

"To be able to conserve what is within the national park, you also need to consider the communities living outside the park," Kyalo says. "It's communities that bear the brunt of human-wildlife conflict, especially when they're farmers. So, there was a need to win these people over to support conservation. But it was nearly impossible because wildlife is causing losses to them."

The solution was the establishment of two community conservancies: Shirango, inhabited by the Watha people, and Kamungi, which encompasses parts of the Kamba community. Already widespread in Tsavo West National Park, this model functions as a conservation buffer.

"With the Watha, the kind of conflict we see is depredation – lions, leopards, and hyenas taking their livestock," Kyalo says. "And with the Kamba, it's elephants and



buffalo that are raiding their crops."

A toolbox of strategies has been deployed to mitigate such events: the erection of "beehive fences" to deter bee-fearing elephants; the planting of crops such as sunflowers, which are unpalatable to wildlife but lucrative for farmers; the employment of community rangers. Residents of the conservancies, typically marginalised from government services due to their remoteness and low population, are reaping additional benefits: piped water, educational grants and health facilities.

Planning has begun too on the construction of an eco-lodge in Kamungi Conservancy and community members are being trained to staff it.

"We also trained a boy from the Kamungi

Clockwise from main: A big tusker; two youngsters being fed at the Voi Reintegration Unit; Satao Camp; an 'emerging tusker' in the middle of a herd. PHOTOS: WILLIAM BURRARD-LUCAS, CATHERINE MARSHALL

Conservancy as a snake handler. It took three years and now he's perfect. Last week he translocated two pythons from the community back into the national park," Kyalo says. "Slowly, we are getting there." Still, there's work to be done. As Kyalo shares this anecdote, I notice a commotion at Satao Camp's waterhole. We climb the watchtower as the drama unfolds: a herd is chased away by a Sheldrick Wildlife Trust vehicle so that a young bull can be darted. Vets inspect a prior spear wound and administer follow-up medication. Job done, they retreat to their vehicle; the bull awakens and staggers off to join the herd.

But human-wildlife conflict isn't the only complication: climate variability is a grave threat. During the recent drought – Kenya's



worst in 40 years – scores of wildlife perished; among them elephants whose calves were discovered bereft and dehydrated. Many rescues found refuge at the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust's Voi Reintegration Unit, located in the shadow of the Taïta Hills near the park's gateway city, Voi (young calves are taken to Sheldrick's nursery in Nairobi National Park).

So dire was the drought, elephants that had been released from the unit 15 years earlier returned, seeking sustenance from their former guardians.

"They decided to come home to get help," says keeper Philip Nyamai.

But the elephants return in happier times, too. "Because they have very good memories, when they have a baby, they

Decimated by generations of trophy hunters, the big tuskers' gene pool is being kindled in their few remaining descendants.

usually come to show us," Nyamai says. "We rescue the ones that are fallen down, are hopeless. We've got one here that has a half trunk – she was caught in a snare. Her name is Ashanti."

Ashanti's wound has healed and her trunk dexterity is improving. She prods Nyamai playfully when he calls her name. Her loyalty is testament to the care delivered at the trust's five units; rhinos and other wildlife are also rehabilitated here. Each morning, keepers lead the elephants into the park so they can interact with their wild cousins. At about 10 or 12 years of age, they leave for good.

Such hope and resilience underpin life here in Tsavo. The drought has now eased, and the rainy season is imminent.

"Cumulus clouds are accumulating," Malingi says. "Everything you see here is sleeping. They are not dead – they are waiting for the rains to come, and then they will rise up. Grasses are sprouting, trees are blossoming, everything is coming back to life. We hope it's going to be good."

It's my last day in the park, and Malingi is lamenting those elusive big tuskers. My train to Nairobi leaves in a couple of hours. The plain quivers with heat; not a creature stirs upon it. Ahead lie the Taïta Hills, the clouds above them heavy with promise.

Malingi brakes suddenly.

"That's him – that's him! You see?" A big tusker stands beside the road, as though waiting for us. His body is mud-caked, his left ear notched. His tusks scythe grasses flushed with the scent of rain; they're hefted with age and authority.

"Bingo!" Malingi says. "Look at the mammoth-like tusks almost touching the ground. If you see him you will not ask twice. What a good send-off. Safari complete!"

Malingi checks his watch, shifts gear, apologises. "You cannot miss your train," he says. Hastening onwards, I cast a backwards glance: resolute and triumphant, the elephant dissolves into the horizon like a memory. **LSL**

The writer was a guest of Bench Africa.

TRAVEL NSW

Luxury of a different kind

Majestic views are worth the hardship of hiking in the Budawang National Park, writes **Tony Boyd**.

It's pouring with rain, I'm soaked to the bone, my boots squelch with every step and there is a leech on my right thumb sucking blood.

So much for my fantasy of a leisurely life of luxury travel post retirement. Rather than lounging on the teak deck of a superyacht somewhere in the Med with a bottle of Bollinger at hand, I am slowly making my way up a mountain in the Budawang Range on the NSW South Coast.

The track is a mess, thanks to decades of erosion that has wiped out the carefully built steps installed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and torrential rain is pouring down it like a river, making progress interminably slow and somewhat dangerous.

To add to the challenge, the erosion has spawned alternative routes that serve only to confuse, and sometimes lead into rocky dead ends.

The leader of our group of four, my brother-law Patrick Lorrimer, tells us to hurry up. "If you don't walk faster it will be dark before we get to camp," he declares.

I thought we were doing quite well, considering the army of leeches, the confusing choice of tracks, the crawling over rocks and the steepness of the mountain – all points he'd failed to mention when he'd told us this a "pretty easy" walk.

I check my watch and realise we left the car five hours ago.

We are headed for Cooyoyo Creek Campground, which is within about 10 metres of the absolute best view in the Budawang National Park – a lookout atop a 50-metre cliff face with views toward the coast. The plan is to camp for a couple of nights at Cooyoyo while doing a side trip to the Monolith Valley to see Shrouded Gods Mountain and the Seven Gods Pinnacles.

I have been coming to this part of the South Coast for more than 20 years, usually renting a beach house at Bawley Point, a small coastal township about 30 kilometres away next to Murrumbidgee National Park, home to one of the most significant Aboriginal sites in Australia.

It was on the beaches of Murrumbidgee that Indigenous people first saw Captain Cook's Endeavour as it sailed up the coast in April 1770. Cook's log says: "We were so near the shore as to distinguish several people upon the sea beach. They appeared to be of a very dark or black colour but whether this was the real colour of their skins or the clothes they might have on I know not."

The same day that Cook saw members of the Budawang tribe tending fires on Koorbrua Beach, he also spotted a prominent local landmark known as Didthul, which means "woman's breast", on account of its distinctive shape.

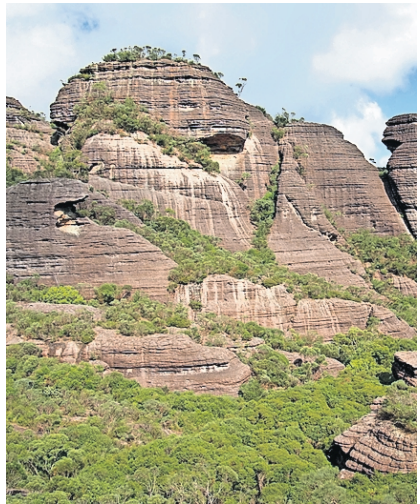
Cook called it Pigeon House Mountain because he thought it looked like an Englishman's bird cage.

Two hundred and fifty-three years later, this bushwalk gives me a chance to broaden my perspective of the area, while enjoying a truly gorgeous wilderness that has remained this way for thousands of years.

During the decades spent on family surfing and bushwalking holidays at Bawley, I always accepted the English naming of landmarks such as Pigeon House and Brush Island. My perspective from the coast was Cook's perspective, even though I regularly visited the 12,000-year-old Murrumbidgee middens.

Being here in the mountains, looking back towards the coast, provides an opportunity to see Didthul Mountain differently. Standing in the bush on an escarpment not far from a sacred site in the Monolith Valley, I am awakened to the significance of standing on Aboriginal land.

After finally navigating our way to the top of the mountain, it's a relatively quick 15-minute walk down the other side to



The writer at Cooyoyo Campground in Budawang National Park, top, and the Monolith Valley. PHOTOS: TONY BOYD, ALAMY

Cooyoyo Campground. Luckily, the weather has cleared, and we quickly set up a fire (using dead branches we gather from the trees, rather than the more soggy wood on the ground) to dry our clothes and make dinner: mushy beef and black bean sauce mixed up in a bag of boiling water. I'm not a fan, but at least it's filling.

Sleeping on a foldable mattress in a tent is a far cry from a suite on a superyacht, but it has the advantage of being much closer to nature and the sounds of the bush.

We are all up early to see the dawn and take photos of Didthul/Pigeon House, before collecting water from the nearby creek, eating a quick breakfast (Weet-Bix or porridge), and then heading up to Monolith Valley.

This six-hour hike – under blue skies – to the valley and back is the highlight of the weekend. Skirting a cliff, we walk up a tree-covered shute into a narrow valley of dead-high grasses. Fixed chains help us climb up a near-vertical rock face to an alpine-like plateau of muddy ground, mosses and small banksias.

We walk through another shallow valley, along a ridge and down into a dark rainforest before reaching Monolith Valley for a picnic lunch.

The valley's spectacular shapes are similar to big fat Buddhas staring down from on high. One section of the rocky outcrop looks like a rough and slightly smaller copy of the Sphinx and another part brings back memories of Uluru.

Camping back at Cooyoyo for a second night is fun, despite a repeat of the mushy beef and black bean sauce for dinner.

The five-hour hike out of the bush is complicated by the fact my wife, Clare, fell and fractured four ribs in the rainforest on the way back from Monolith Valley. But she's hardly enough to push through the pain.

Crossing the Yaddboro – the same river we navigated on the way in two days earlier – is faster this time: we leave our boots on to walk through the knee-deep water, knowing we can change into fresh clothes at our car before heading back to Sydney.

In hindsight, the bushwalk is one of the best I have done. The views are better than in the Blue Mountains and the challenging conditions make for a greater sense of achievement. OK, it wasn't a luxury cruise, but I wouldn't have missed this opportunity to commune with nature and yarn around the campfire (while drying my clothes). **LSL**

TRAVEL UGANDA

In pursuit of a dream

From a young age, Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka aspired to help her country's wildlife, writes **Catherine Marshall**.

Uganda's great apes owe a debt of gratitude to a pet vervet called Poncho. The monkey belonged to the Cuban ambassador to Uganda in the 1970s; he would sit on the gate of the neighbouring house in Kampala, where a young Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka lived with her family.

"I was fascinated by his fingers and fingernails that looked exactly like mine – so human," she writes in her recently published memoir, *Walking with Gorillas: The Journey of an African Wildlife Vet*. "He was my first venture into studying primates."

It was a time of tremendous political upheaval. Kalema-Zikusoka's parents had both been involved in politics; when Idi Amin staged a coup in 1971, her father – a tireless advocate for social upliftment and a member of the overthrown government – was assassinated. "I was only two years old, so I never got to know him," she says. "And writing the book, I realised he had had so much impact on my life."

This legacy is self-evident as I sit down with Kalema-Zikusoka at her cafe in Entebbe, near the shores of Lake Victoria. An offshoot of Gorilla Conservation Coffee,

the social enterprise supports smallholder coffee farmers from around the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, stronghold of Uganda's endangered gorilla population, a short flight west of here.

It's one of many initiatives spearheaded by her organisation Conservation Through Public Health (CTPH), which she founded in 2003 with the aim of empowering communities and so improving outcomes for the gorilla population.

This visionary disposition bloomed early: in high school, Kalema-Zikusoka helped revive the school's Wildlife Club, and talked the principal into taking students on an excursion to Queen Elizabeth National Park.

"There were very few animals, so it was a big disappointment. I couldn't believe that there were hardly any lions," she recalls. "I thought, maybe I should be a vet who works with wildlife. But such a position didn't exist in Uganda at the time."

Nonetheless, Kalema-Zikusoka pursued studies at the University of London's Royal Veterinary College in the UK. It wasn't until after the first gorilla tourists had arrived in Uganda in 1993 that she got to work with the primates while on a student research



Dr Gladys Kalema-Zikusoka and a ranger, above, in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park. They track gorillas – such as the one at left – to monitor their health. PHOTOS: JO-ANNE MCARTHUR

placement at Bwindi. Trekking with tourists, she was struck by the potential for conservation-led economic growth.

"I got to understand the role of tourism in conservation and how communities are benefiting from tourism," she says.

This positive impact had been demonstrated in neighbouring Rwanda, where gorillas were attracting crowds. Uganda, by comparison, was flailing – even though around half the mountain gorilla population – now estimated to number 1063 – is found in Uganda (they also range across the Democratic Republic of Congo).

The experience also underlined the risks inherent in human-gorilla interaction: shared DNA renders great apes susceptible to human-borne diseases. As tourism improved, so the risks to habituated gorillas

increased. After her stint at Bwindi, Kalema-Zikusoka presented a report to the then executive director of Uganda National Parks, Dr Eric Edroma, outlining the risks and the critical need for a dedicated wildlife vet. He told her that when she graduated, the job would be waiting for her.

The following year, degree in hand, she returned home and set up a vet unit with the Uganda Wildlife Authority.

"There were so many firsts," she recalls. "No-one thought you should even touch a wild animal to treat it. It was always [about] breaking barriers. I'd meet resistance, but I'd also meet people who supported me. I worked with them, and we'd get it done."

Kalema-Zikusoka shaped her job description on the run: one day she'd be translocating giraffes, the next she'd be deep

in the rainforest removing a snare from a gorilla's limb. In-between, she married and had two children, lobbied for funding and built networks with government departments, academics and primatologist Dr Jane Goodall. In the forward to Kalema-Zikusoka's book, Goodall calls her an "inspiring example" who "has made a huge difference to conservation in Uganda".

Soon after the vet unit's launch, the intractable link between human and gorilla health was amplified when a baby gorilla died during a scabies outbreak. The infection was traced to impoverished communities living on the park's periphery; gorillas would often forage in their gardens. CTPH was established in response to the predicament, and in the two decades since has achieved untold success.

"We've made a lot of progress," says Kalema-Zikusoka. "Gorillas are herded back [from community land] before they get sick. Since people are getting more healthy and hygienic we haven't had a scabies outbreak, [and] giardia has almost disappeared in the gorillas."

"And as we attend to people's health and their needs, they care more about the gorillas because we show them that we are not only concerned about the gorillas and the forest and the wildlife, but we also care about them. So, they're more likely to want to protect the wildlife."

Such is CTPH's success, it has won international funding and recognition for its work – which now includes environmental preservation, family planning programs and support for sustainable agricultural practices such as the coffee project.

A laboratory monitors gorilla health and a community lodge offers accommodation

overlooking a ripple of mist-plugged valleys at Buhoma, Bwindi's primary gateway.

When COVID-19 struck in 2020, CTPH rose to yet another seemingly insurmountable challenge. Appointed to the government's COVID taskforce, Kalema-Zikusoka was able to prioritise an immunisation program for rangers and insist on mandatory vaccinations for tourists. She'd long lobbied for a mask mandate for gorilla tourists, and the pandemic helped facilitate this. But Bwindi's habituated gorilla troops remain exposed.

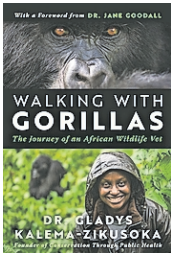
"[Tourists are] wearing masks, but they still want to get close to the gorillas," she says. "We are continuing to test for respiratory viruses, but also looking at other things like bacteria, salmonella, typhoid."

And though the great apes have demanded the lion's share of her time, Kalema-Zikusoka hasn't forgotten the residents of Queen Elizabeth National Park, where her dream to become a wildlife vet took root all those years ago. Now stable, its lion population is nonetheless vulnerable. As tourism has cast a lifeline to gorillas, so she hopes it might change the fate of wildlife in Uganda's lesser-known parks.

"The savannah parks are not getting enough tourists," she says. "It is not enough just to see the wildlife – if you visit the communities, they're less likely to kill the gorilla, the chimp, the lion, the elephant ... or destroy the habitat."

As once a curious child who encountered a pet vervet and a park bereft of lions was wont to choose an unconventional path – one that would change the course of Ugandan conservation. **LSL**

The writer travelled to Uganda as a guest of the Uganda Wildlife Authority.



Need to know
Book *Walking with Gorillas: The Journey of an African Wildlife Vet* is published by Arcade Publishing.

Staying there Rooms at CTPH's Gorilla Conservation Camp cost from \$100 per night; ctpth.org.

Coffee Gorilla Conservation Coffee's safari experience includes a meeting with community farmers. The cafe in Entebbe is open for breakfast and lunch. See: gorillaconservation-coffee.org