

FROM TOP Flying low over the Luwegu River, the sand patterns are endlessly varied, whether a dry 'sand river' or in the narrowing stream still flowing with water; hippos semi-submerge themselves in pans where the water hyacinth protects their skin; the Elegant grasshopper appears by the thousands along the edges of rivers and lakes in the northern Selous for a short period each year

In Plain Sight

For photojournalist Robert J Ross, what began as a one-week trip to Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve evolved into a years-long odyssey to capture its wildlife, its landscapes and its heart

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS ROBERT J ROSS



arriving as a wide-eyed American high-school student, I spent the summer of 1973 in Kenya and Tanzania exploring Nairobi, listening to Patrick Hemingway speak about wildlife conservation, camping in Amboseli and climbing Kilimanjaro. I went home forever changed, blessed with a serious case of what the French call *Mal d'Afrique*. Over the following 40 years I have returned to the 'Dark Continent' numerous times, as a tourist, as a business consultant, as a resident of Cape Town for several years, as a photographer and as a lover of that intriguing, exasperating, vast, varied and endlessly fascinating land mass that spreads from Cairo to Cape Town and from Durban to Dakar.

By the time that I first set foot in the Selous Game Reserve in 2009 I had seen a lot of Africa but nothing prepared me for what I found there. Flying low above the miombo woodland, palm forests, the open savannahs and the meandering sand rivers on the bumpy 90-minute flight from Dar es Salaam, I knew that I was headed somewhere special. Stepping down from the small Cessna I was welcomed by a blast of equatorial heat and the sounds and smells of wild Africa: my exploration of the Selous began.

We had flown over the northern Selous where a handful of photographic camps share the open plains, oxbow lakes and the northern bank of the Rufiji River. Crossing the river and continuing south towards Mozambique there are almost 40 large blocks of land, most at least several hundred thousand acres ►



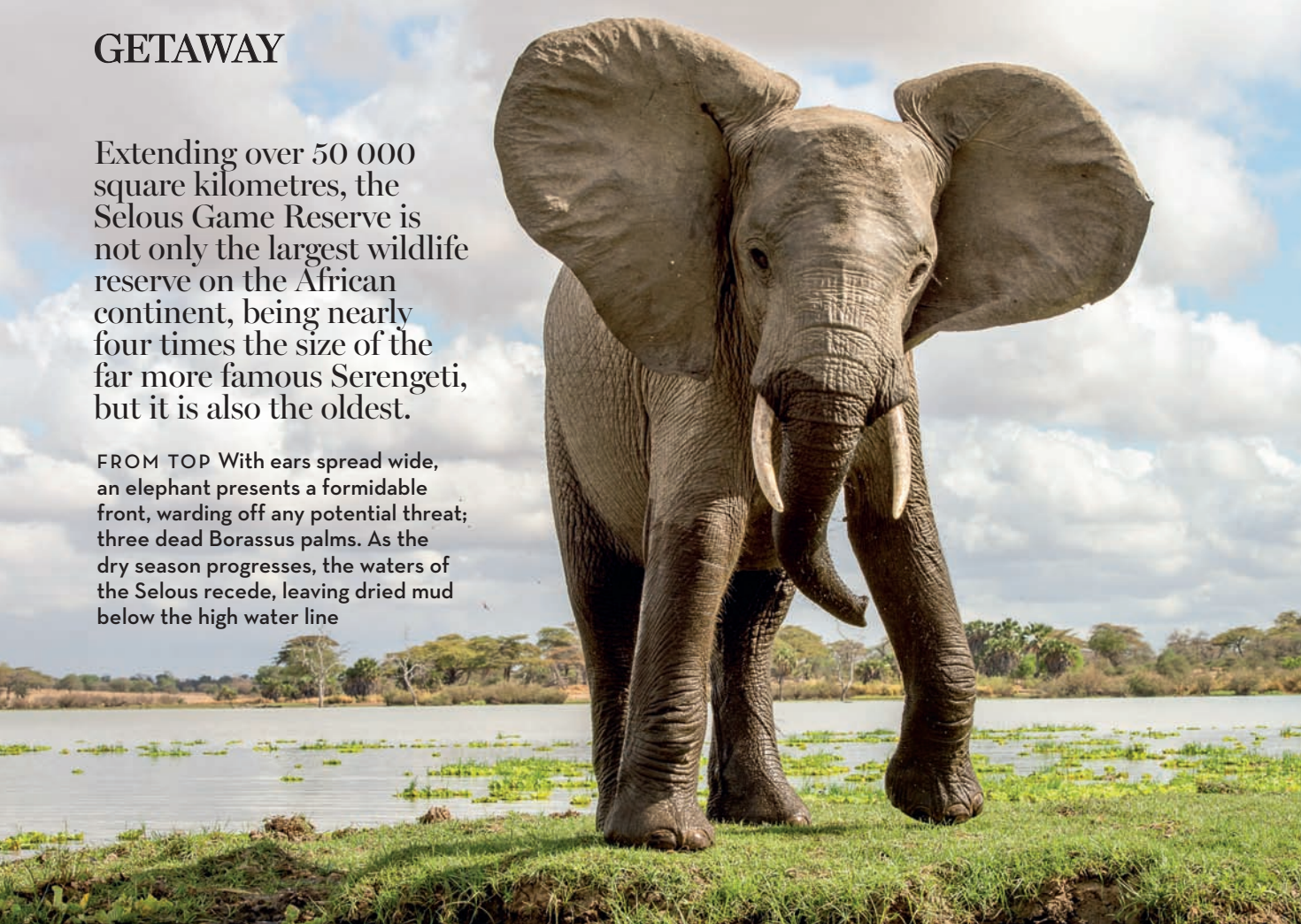
FROM TOP Stately Borassus palms rise from the swamps between the Rufiji River and the northern lakes; the Red-billed Quelea is the world's most abundant bird species, with total population estimates up to 10 billion



GETAWAY

Extending over 50 000 square kilometres, the Selous Game Reserve is not only the largest wildlife reserve on the African continent, being nearly four times the size of the far more famous Serengeti, but it is also the oldest.

FROM TOP With ears spread wide, an elephant presents a formidable front, warding off any potential threat; three dead Borassus palms. As the dry season progresses, the waters of the Selous recede, leaving dried mud below the high water line



apiece, leased out to big game hunting companies as they have been since Brian Nicholson set up the modern hunting scheme in the early 1960s. Access is strictly controlled and is limited to the clients, invited guests and staff of those companies. I was headed to the block where the Lukula River joins the Luwegu and where a few brave souls had decided to stop hunting, build a luxury bush camp and offer photographic tourism deep in the heart of the hunting area. It was an ambitious and worthy, if ultimately unsustainable idea, and I arrived to photograph and write a magazine story or two about what they were trying to do.

The valleys are stunningly beautiful, hippos and large crocodiles everywhere in the river, a continual parade of other animals coming down to drink, birds and insects of every imaginable size, shape and colour offering a symphonic cacophony. In less than a day we encountered wild dogs, elephants, kudu, countless waterbuck, impala and not a single other human being. The southern Selous really is an extraordinary wilderness.

After a few days of what was to be a one-week visit I realised that there was much more to see and to share than could be accomplished in that short time. The magazine stories morphed into a book and a one-week commitment of time evolved into six years. The Selous is not easy but it is rewarding if you work hard.

The photographic opportunities were endless. Riding in an open Land Rover, dusty and hot, with more than a hundred crimson-red Carmine Bee-eaters gracefully flying around us and feeding on the insects stirred up by the vehicle is an experience ►



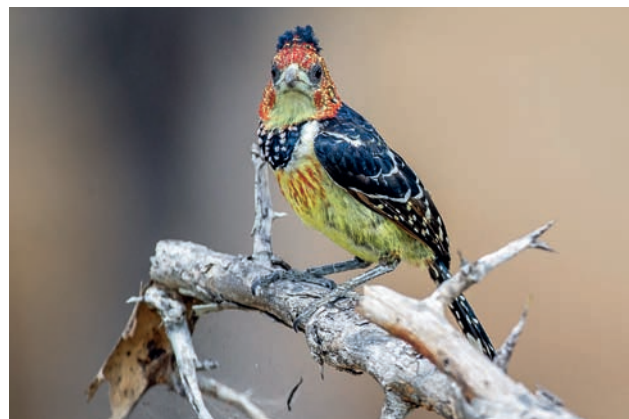


FROM TOP A lone waterbuck stands on a sandbar in the Luwegu River; the Crested Barbet is an aggressively territorial bird. They have been recorded chasing off other barbets, doves and larger birds, as well as rats and snakes

that would put a smile on anyone's face, unless you were hopelessly trying to capture the essence of that magical scene in a single frame. Eventually I just set down my cameras and enjoyed the spectacle. An important lesson was learned after reaching one arm, camera in hand, into a narrow opening in an ancient baobab tree to photograph leaf-nosed bats. I returned several days later to set a camera trap on the same opening, the next morning discovering an image of a young male leopard exiting that very tree hollow.

Quietly standing on a high river bank, watching an elephant walk calmly and purposefully through the hot, dry river bed below, stopping at a particular spot, artfully using its trunk to dig for several minutes until it reaches cool, clear water, makes you realise how little we humans know about our environment and how much we can learn from many of our co-denizens. Soaring in a microlight above the lakes of the Selous at dawn is probably as close as I will ever come to seeing heaven. For each of these stories there are at least a hundred more.

What makes the Selous special is that so little has changed from the sights and sounds of a hundred or a thousand years earlier. While that may sound wonderful, one of my great fears is that the same sentence may not be able to be written even five or 10 years from now, and that would be a tragedy. It takes more good fortune than I had to see a rhinoceros in the Selous today and there are far fewer elephants than there were a generation ago. But with dedicated management, that can change for the better within a decade or two, a tiny blip in the life of the Selous. ■



This is an excerpt from *The Selous in Africa: A Long Way from Anywhere* by Robert J Ross, featuring nearly 400 photographs by the renowned photojournalist. The book is available from amazon.com.

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