

Close Encounters of the Endangered Kind



Episode XIV: Marine Rangers, Hippos and Lebron by Tricia Berry

Off we went the next morning in the pitch dark with our driver KK at the wheel. Using a portable spotlight, Derek and Mike searched for wildlife both looking for eyes reflecting the light as well as the bulk of the animal itself. It's quite startling to find multiple elephants staring at you in the dark as they're feeding with their families by the side of the road. We had warthogs passing by and calm but wary Cape buffalo looking at us as we passed. As we approached the Nile, the sun rose over the Savannah behind us. Joe murmured, "Incredible".

We pulled to the side of the dirt track about an hour out to eat the huge spread of breakfast items that had been sent with us. Looking out over the grasslands leading to the Nile, Mike and Derek noticed that the massive herd of Ugandan Kob, a beautiful species of antelope spread out before us as well as some of the giraffes were all suddenly very still and looking in

the same direction. The guys scanned the area with their binoculars and - sure enough - they pointed out two lionesses creeping through the grass towards the Kob herd. The two huntresses soon took off full speed towards something we couldn't see and disappeared behind a line of bushes.

Our destination was the Delta Marine Ranger Station. Here we

would meet the rangers using the boat Joe and I had purchased replacing one of their patrol boats that had been destroyed by fire while out on patrol, costing the life of a beloved senior ranger. I had heard Mike speaking about the accident when he was the guest speaker on one of IEF's Conservation Chats over Zoom. I was moved by the emotion in his voice and I promised that I would help Mike purchase a replacement boat.

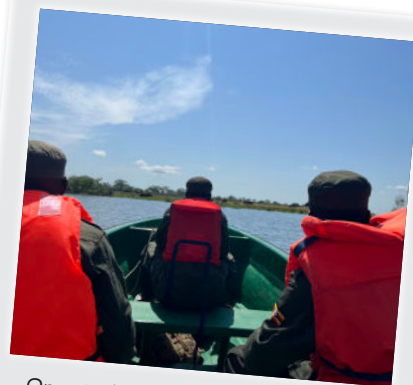
Since I had first started working with Debbie to support IEF projects, she had been telling me about the dire need for more marine rangers and ranger stations to protect MFNP from poachers coming in by boat and transporting their illegal contraband via the Nile River. With so few patrol boats and marine rangers, poachers would watch the activity of the patrol boats to know when the coast was clear for them to enter the Park or transport their contraband. More ranger presence could protect more of the park and I wanted to support those efforts through IEF.

Most of the rangers we met seemed very young to Joe and I. Hanging out while waiting for our visit, they were wearing their own t-shirts, shorts and rubber sandals. I asked if they could swim since they were marine rangers and scouts. That was a very funny question to them. Unlike in the U.S., children in Uganda are not encouraged to play and swim in bodies of water. By just falling into the water they risk attacks by hippos and crocodiles, so what swim strokes they knew were for emergency escapes to the shore if ever needed. But following the death of the ranger in the boating accident, all marine rangers are now given swimming lessons in the pools owned by the safari lodges.

We were shown the boats, nets and poaching gear they had recently confiscated from poachers. The head ranger of the station then asked us if we wanted to go on a patrol, ending up at the next closest MFNP Marine Station on the river. Of course we did. Mike, Derek, Andy and KK would take our vehicle up to the Buligi Marine Ranger Station and hopefully arrive near the same time we would. Debbie, Joe and I climbed into the boat while the rangers changed into their official gear. The boys we had been speaking with turned into men in their official ranger uniforms. Funny how that happens.



Look closely for the lioness on the hunt for kob in MFNP



On patrol with the marine rangers of Murchison Falls

We passed many elephants on the shore, but were surprised how few hippos were along the river. There were some, but not in the numbers we had seen in Zambia. The hippos are being poached relentlessly for their meat and large canine teeth made of ivory. These tusks can grow up to 1.5 feet long and are highly valued, sometimes used as a substitute for elephant ivory because it's denser and often considered more workable. Droughts, then flooding, and then the pandemic lockdown have created strains on people's livelihoods. Organized crime such as cartels have more opportunities to entice locals to poach for them with the promise of money and food. It was a precarious life for the hippos on this part of the Nile.

Local poachers net the hippos from boats, pull them underwater where it is too deep to stand until they drown. We had also seen notched spears used to kill hippos in the contraband storage building at the JOCC. The global hippo trade has been picking up. Since hippo females typically have just one offspring every other year, these animals are slow to recover from their population losses.

When we reached the Buligi Marine Station, Joe and I laughed to see that a young ranger helping us out of the boat was wearing a LeBron James basketball jersey. I'm from Los Angeles originally and hadn't expected that the LA Lakers star would be popular

in Uganda. We were given a tour of the Buligi Marine Station as it was one of the first projects Debbie had discussed with me about supporting. The tour included the rangers showing us another surprise plaque recognizing IEF and our Berry Family Trust.

Tired from our early start and a morning of non-stop activities, we returned to the Paraa Lodge for lunch and a quick rest before going on an afternoon game drive.



Joe and I are proud to help support the Buligi Marine Station in MFNP.

Next Episode:

These are Big People, You Must Let them Pass!

Here is where the Nile flows from Lake Victoria through a gorge less than 33 feet wide, sending down water at a rate of 11,000 cubic feet per second (depending on the time of year and rainfall). We were soaked from the spray but happy to have experienced the mighty Murchison Falls.

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November 2-13, 2025



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