

“Kora Revisited”

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Towards the end of 1997, I finally returned to Kenya's Kora National Park, the wilderness legacy of legendary lion man George Adamson, after an absence of eight years.

It was, as expected, an emotionally charged experience. For my mission, on that earlier visit in 1989, just days after George's murder at the hands of a group of armed bandits from whose clutches he had so courageously been trying to rescue his friend Inge Ledertheil, and his longtime employee Bitacha, had been the unenviable sad one of arranging to have the last three of his lion cub orphans relocated. The orphans in question--Batian, the male, and Furaha and Rafiki, his two sisters--eventually found their freedom in Botswana's Tuli bushlands, where for many years they lived the wild and eventful lives that George, I am sure, would have wished for them. And in Tuli today, George's lion pride lives on in the many descendants of these one-time orphans of his.

In September 1997, while visiting London, I looked up George's close friend and longtime camp assistant, Doddie Edmunds, who had returned to Britain soon after George's funeral and who had trained there to be a nurse, in the hope of one day returning to work in Africa. Both Doddie and I were privileged to have known George in his twilight years, Doddie having lived at the Kora camp, Kampi ya Simba, for long stints over a six-year period. Instinctively, we now both felt the time was right for a return to our old stomping grounds at Kora, to where George's grave is flanked by that of his brother Terence, and the one of the lion he called Super Cub. We also wanted to see what had become of Kora, and to establish what kind of future lay in store for it, as we both still entertained ideas for possible conservation projects there.

On arriving in Nairobi in October and making our intentions known to the Kenya Wildlife Service, we were the surprised--and grateful--recipients, not only of the necessary authorization, but of complimentary park entry, vehicle entrance and camping as well. Elsewhere in Nairobi, though, the prospects did not look quite so promising. Time and again, acquaintances warned us that we could expect to find Kora overrun with livestock grazing illegally in the park, that the airstrip was in a state of disrepair, and that security in the area was at best uncertain. On closer questioning, however, it became apparent that none of these people really knew for sure what the actual situation was at Kora. So we left Nairobi in our hired jeep with open minds and with an attitude of "what will be, will be."

Kora is located some 350 kilometers northeast of Nairobi, and Kora National Park constitutes one of the largest conservation areas in Kenya. Getting there is a slog of six hours or more, so we had loaded our jeep fit to bursting with drums of drinking water and Jerry-cans of spare fuel, besides our bags. The journey went smoothly until, eighty kilometers or so from the National Park, the wheel-bearing on the jeep's right axle disintegrated--and our hearts sank.

From the postmaster's telephone in the remote village of Kyso, we contacted Rasuls, the car hire firm, and explained our predicament. Assistance was promised, but we had no way of knowing how long this was going to take and our time in Kenya was short. At Kyso, we were taken under the wing of Fr Hubert Martin, an Irish priest who runs the Catholic mission there. With great kindness and no little charm, he made his home ours also for the night. Come midnight, as we were about to go to sleep, we heard a vehicle drawing up outside the mission. Incredibly, this was Rasuls' emergency team--with the spares we needed. As for the next two hours, the mechanics worked on the stricken jeep. The following morning, then, we were able to complete our journey to Kora.

Kora National Park owes its existence to George's pioneering efforts, going back to the 1970s, when he had rented the Kora area from the regional council on an annual basis for the rehabilitation

of his lions. The area was subsequently proclaimed a National Reserve, and George's long-cherished dream--that Kora would one day be gazetted a National Park--was finally realized in 1989, just three days before he was murdered. Kora adjoins on the North Mwingi, Bisanadi and Rahole National Reserves. At its most easterly point, at a place called Adamson's Falls on the Tana River, it borders on the Meru National Park, where the lioness Elsa, of Born Free fame, had lived, and where in 1960 Elsa was buried.

At the boundary of the North Mwingi National Reserve, we stopped at a police outpost which is now also used by KWS rangers. There we met one Emanuel Maritim, a KWS ranger who radioed news of our arrival through Kora National Park headquarters, which is not far from George's old camp. It transpired that Doddie and I were the first visitors to Kora in more than five months.

For much of the 1980s Kora was synonymous with the depredations of poachers, bandits and cattle raiders--sometimes, although not always correctly, branded as "shifta"--whose armed forays from the countries to the north had ravaged Kenya's elephant herds and terrorized its people. From Emanuel, we learnt that the situation was much improved, but that as a precaution he, with his trusty FN automatic rifle, would personally escort us into Kora, along with his fellow ranger Vitalis Kakenge.

The access road into Kora was in surprising good shape, considering how we remembered it from days of old. The feeling on driving through the park was one of familiarity--and emotion, particularly on first glimpsing Kora Rock in the distance. For it was at the base of this giant outcrop that Kampi ya Simba had been situated. Contrary to what we had heard, we did not find Kora to be overrun with herds of trespassing livestock. Indeed, over the next few days we were to see parties of fringe-eared oryx, some lesser kudu, gerenuks, dik-diks, and buffaloes in the riverine thickets. And just some seven kilometers from Kampi ya Simba I came across pug marks of a young male lion, heading--predictably enough--in the direction of the camp.

At the camp itself there was no feeling of sadness or loss, only one of great peace and tranquillity. Doddie's and George's huts were still there, as was the camp's fence, the cubs' enclosure, the workshop and remnants of the old kitchen. On stepping through the small front gate from which the old man would routinely go out to join his lion pride, a pair of yellow-billed hornbills "tick-tocked" approvingly from a nearby tree.

In those days, Kampi ya Simba was synonymous just as much with birds as it was with lions. Hornbills and starlings would join us at lunch times, while marabou storks stood around outside, huddled together like financiers discussing the day's business. I watched the hornbill pair, then walked back to the jeep to get some bread, which on returning I scattered in front of me. The hornbills flapped noisily to the ground and pecked at the bits of bread. Emanuel, observing this, informed me that many of George's other feathered friends were now resident at Park headquarters just a few kilometers away.

Later we drove down to the graves. But again, this was not a solemn undertaking but rather a deeply reflective one. We noticed that new leaves were now sprouting on the desert roses that had been planted around the graves of George, Terence and Super Cub.

The Park headquarters was new to Doddie and me, having been set up only in 1993. Housing about thirty KWS personnel, it consists of a wide circle of accommodation huts, and a mess area and storeroom, with office buildings and twin flagpoles at the center. The word "Kora" is inscribed in large letters within a square of whitewashed stones at the base of the flagpoles. I could not help but feel that George would have been pleased, as in his time there was no permanent ranger post in the Kora area.

And then there was the birds! The vulturine guinea fowl, which George had always fed, strode around the camp with their typical long-legged gait. Whole families of hornbills fluttered in the trees, while starlings hopped busily about on the ground. Behind the offices, perched on the uppermost branches of a tall, dead tree, were two fan-tailed ravens, loftily surveying the scene. Could these be representatives, I wondered, of that mischievous trio of Kampi ya Simba ravens that George had named Mad, Bad, and Worse?

At the park headquarters, Emanuel introduced us to the park's personnel, many of whom still remember us from all those years ago. There was a tall man feeding the birds, and we realized that it had been he who had lifted George's body out of the vehicle after the murder. He was protecting us Kora and its animals for George, he told us. He had also helped us with the relocation of the lion orphans, so we were happy to be able to give him news of their progress in Tuli in faraway Botswana. What delighted us above all, though, was the obvious affection with which all these people remembered George and his work.

Over the next couple of days we were able to visit many of the old haunts, camping out at night under the stars among the doum palms on the banks of the Tana. One afternoon we traveled downstream to the remote village of Asako, home to most of George's old camp staff. There, we were treated to a wonderful reunion, and were again among familiar faces, including Bitacha, who had witnessed George's murder and who had had both of his legs smashed in the attack. Now, Bitacha led us to his home and proudly showed off his new baby son.

Between 1989 and 1994 the village and its inhabitants suffered repeatedly at the hands of marauding bandits. The school was burned down, as were the dwellings of many of George's former staff. Life, even today, is far from easy in the village, but the men somehow manage to maintain their good humor. And Shura, one of George's oldest friends, is building himself a new home.

At the palm-roofed dispensary, Doddie and I were asked to sign the village visitors' book. The village "doctor" is the son of Kiya, one of the men slain along with George. His medical knowledge consists almost entirely of what he could glean while assisting two nurses at the dispensary. But those nurses have long since gone, and today he continues the work unaided and without a salary, making diagnoses and administering treatments, the details of which he painstakingly records in an impressive journal. This gave Doddie, as a trained nurse, new insights into the principal maladies from which these villagers suffer and what drugs are most required at Asako.

The next morning we returned to Kora to climb that great sentinel of stone that is Kora Rock. From the top, we could see the whole of Kora laid out beneath us, in all its splendor and with all those familiar landmarks--the camp, Boy's Rock, Christian's Rock, Boy's Lugga and the Tana River--plainly visible. I called down to Emanuel, who had stayed behind at the camp, and was greeted moments later by a familiar "kaw, kaw" above my head. One of the ravens, hearing the echo of my call, was swooping, diving and spiraling in the air above, just as these birds had done when George was king in these parts.

George's legion of admirers can take heart from the fact that Kora has not collapsed after all, as so many had predicted after his passing. A new park headquarters is to be built near Adamson's Falls on the Tana River, with a bridge linking Kora to Meru National Park, enabling visitors to Meru to cross over into Kora to experience the singular grandeur that is George's legacy.