



The kob antelope is an icon in Uganda, featuring on the country's coat-of-arms. **Mark Eveleigh** investigates a project to translocate over 100 into a breathtakingly beautiful yet little-visited East African wilderness.

HOME ON THE RANGE

Ugandan kob (*Kobus kob thomasi*) are mainly found in the west and northwest of Uganda, including Queen Elizabeth and Murchison Falls National Parks. Kidepo National Park didn't have a population until recently.

Mark Carwardine/naturepl.com



Above: Philip Akorongimoe (right) has been a ranger in Kidepo for 17 years and has become a friend of the Ik tribe. Right: 'Walter' the kob hangs out with waterbucks for protection. Below: this lioness and kob made headlines in 2012 as the big cat seemed to 'adopt' the youngster.



Male Ugandan kob spar at a lek to impress females.

STRUTTING THEIR STUFF

Lekking is not just for birds: male kob antelopes use group displays to set up territory and attract a mate.

On the face of it, kob appear to be a fairly typical African antelope – elegant, horned, agile – but one thing sets them apart from many of their cousins: they gather to lek. Usually associated with grouse, waders and other birds, lekking is a territorial mating strategy where males gather in a particular area to impress females.

The kob assemble in clusters of circular territories, each 10–15m in diameter, within a larger breeding area. Those at the centre are prime real estate and the bucks jostle for these best positions,

displaying their fitness with parallel walks and head shaking. Then, if challenged by another male for the territory, they will test their horns against the intruder in an effort to establish superiority. If two males are equally matched these showdowns may escalate into full-blown horn-locked fighting, but more often than not posturing is sufficient.

Once a hierarchy been established, females then mate with just a few of the most dominant males, ensuring their offspring inherit the strongest genes.

“WITH ITS SOARING MOUNTAINS AND GREAT SWEEPING VALLEYS, KIDEPO IS PERHAPS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PARK IN EAST AFRICA.”

As we watch a mixed herd of defassa waterbuck and newly arrived Ugandan kob grazing near a waterhole, Corrie Brits, manager at Apoka Safari Lodge, comments drily: “It seems that kob are not yet on the menu as far as the lions are concerned.”

The rock outcrop at Apoka was once a meeting place for the ancient Ik tribe, who roamed these valleys long before the nearby borders of Kenya and South Sudan were even imagined, and who now live in the nearby mountains. Even farther back in time, before the Ik arrived, this rock was a prime lookout point for local lion prides, and so it persists today. Neither the presence of tribesmen nor of tourists seems to worry the cats unduly. As I stepped out of my stilted bungalow early in the morning, the first thing I noticed was a series of massive pugmarks crossing the flowerbeds by my back door.

The lions of Kidepo Valley National Park are known for the power that equips them to hunt the estimated 13,000 buffalo that roam here. At 1,442km², the park covers an area that’s only slightly smaller than Greater London. While traffic jams are unlikely (in fact, it’s rare to see another vehicle), Uganda’s secret northern wilderness can still get spectacularly congested: while exploring the previous afternoon it had taken us more than an hour to ease our Land Cruiser through a vast herd of buffalo. Young calves skittered away, tossing their hornless heads,

Above: Ugandan kob inhabit open and wooded savanna with access to water, as well as riverine grasslands. The antelopes from Muchison were released into the most protected and visible part of Kidepo.

and tough old askaris (guards) protected the flanks of a herd that was big enough to trample a swathe as wide as an airstrip. Even for the 120-strong lion population, tangling with adversaries like this would be a formidable challenge. Zebra, too, form part of the lions’ diets. But the huge numbers of waterbuck are rarely hunted, since the cats find their meat unpalatable, and the common Jackson’s hartebeest are usually too fast to catch. Kob, on the other hand, might make a tasty meal.

RECENT ARRIVALS

With its soaring mountains and great sweeping valleys, Kidepo is perhaps the most beautiful park in East Africa. It is Uganda’s third largest, after Queen Elizabeth and Murchison Falls. But, while Murchison is overpopulated with about 40,000 Ugandan kob, Kidepo has had none at all, until recently that is.

“In 2013, two Ugandan kob inexplicably appeared in the valley,” recalls Johnson Augustine Masereka, manager of



Mark Eveleigh: x3; sparring: Jabrison/naturepl.com; license: Adri de Visser/Minden Pictures/FLPA



THE EARLY SIGNS ARE PROMISING, AND DISCUSSIONS ARE ALREADY UNDERWAY FOR THE TRANSLOCATION OF MORE KOB.

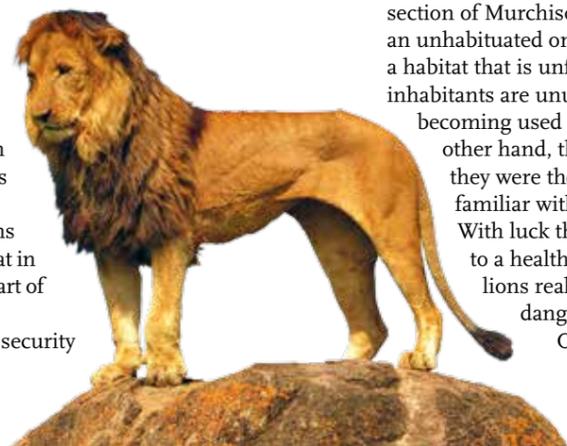
it was a slow and cautious process, but occasionally there were sudden bursts of unexpected excitement that gave me a new respect for what kob are capable of."

Osuna will never forget how one kob ewe jumped right over a pickup truck and a big male cleared the six-foot boma wall, landing with a glancing blow against the driver's shoulder but miraculously leaving him unharmed. The round-up took about three weeks and then finally the animals were loaded into a truck for the 440km drive to Kidepo. Even then there were complications when some of the males started to fight. Osuna and his colleagues were forced to wrestle with them to pull rubber piping over their rapier horns to prevent them from hurting each other.

The location for the release of the 26 rams and 86 ewes was crucial and an ideal habitat in the central – most protected and visible – part of Kidepo National Park was chosen.

"We're a border park with very specific security

Above: female kob may have young twice a year so a herd can grow quickly. Below: lions aren't a threat to the new arrivals... yet.

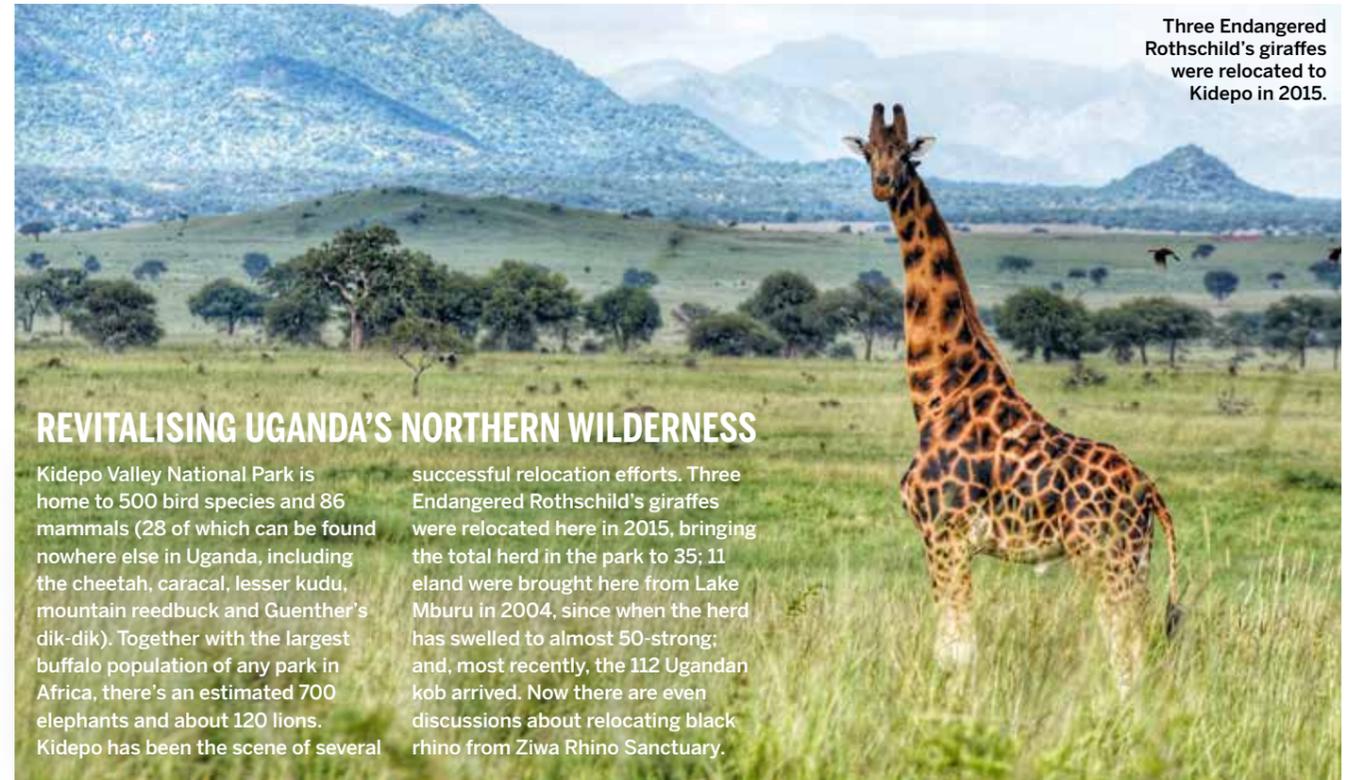


problems – sharing a frontier with South Sudan and northern Kenya's Turkana district," says chief warden Masereka. "But we have the support of the Ugandan People's Defence Force to control armed dissidents in the area and we have rangers at 11 outposts. We have more than adequate manpower, and since disarmament in the Karamojong area in around 2008–2009 we have had no security issues and little poaching in the park."

Kidepo's Narus Valley gets its name from a local Karamojong word meaning 'muddy' and it is the floodplains here that help to guarantee a sustainable habitat for grazers even when the bigger Kidepo Valley has dried out completely. Kob are highly dependent on water – though one subspecies, the white-eared kob, undertakes long-distance migrations through the Sudd region (one or two have even turned up in Kidepo), kob usually try to stay close to water. So it is expected that Narus Valley will remain their preferred range, where they will be able to benefit from the trampling and clearing effect of vast buffalo herds and a healthy population of about 700 elephants.

Because the kob were taken from a particularly remote section of Murchison Falls National Park, the herd was an unhabituated one. Having been introduced into a habitat that is unfamiliar to them, the new Kidepo inhabitants are unusually shy. So they're only slowly becoming used to wildlife-watching vehicles. On the other hand, they have arrived from a habitat where they were the preferred prey of big cats and so are familiar with strategies for avoiding predators. With luck the kob population will have risen to a healthy and sustainable figure before the lions realise there's now an alternative to the dangerous buffalo on offer.

One of the ewes that was relocated



Three Endangered Rothschild's giraffes were relocated to Kidepo in 2015.

REVITALISING UGANDA'S NORTHERN WILDERNESS

Kidepo Valley National Park is home to 500 bird species and 86 mammals (28 of which can be found nowhere else in Uganda, including the cheetah, caracal, lesser kudu, mountain reedbuck and Guenther's dik-dik). Together with the largest buffalo population of any park in Africa, there's an estimated 700 elephants and about 120 lions. Kidepo has been the scene of several

successful relocation efforts. Three Endangered Rothschild's giraffes were relocated here in 2015, bringing the total herd in the park to 35; 11 eland were brought here from Lake Mburu in 2004, since when the herd has swelled to almost 50-strong; and, most recently, the 112 Ugandan kob arrived. Now there are even discussions about relocating black rhino from Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary.

Right: predation of buffalo by lions could potentially be eased now the kob have turned up. Below: Johnson Augustine Masereka recalls when the antelopes first appeared in the valley.



from Murchison must have been pregnant because within a month the 'refugees' had dropped their first young. Kob can breed twice a year and within three more months there were 25 babies in the herd.

The early signs are promising, and discussions are already underway for the translocation of more kob from Murchison. "We're still monitoring predation pressure on the herd in Kidepo," says UWA executive director Dr Andrew Seguya. "We're in the planning stages and possibly by mid-2018 we'll be ready to transport more."

All well and good, but nature has shown time and again that the most well-meaning intervention can lead to unforeseen ripple effects. The arrival of kob on the menu could turn out to be good news for Kidepo's buffalo, but if kob numbers and accessibility elevate them to the position of preferred lion prey then there's a chance that the already massive buffalo population could be left with virtually no predation pressure and might grow unchecked.

Uganda Wildlife Authority ranger Philip Akorongimoe sees little reason for worry, though. "We now have about 13,000 buffalo in the park and the majority roam Narus Valley," he says. "Numbers could rise above 20,000 and it would still be fine as long as they spread their range into Kidepo Valley as well."

SMELLY DETERRENT

For the time being, though, the Kidepo lions don't seem to know what to make of the new arrivals. Moreover, at least one of the kob has demonstrated a seemingly cunning survival strategy.

A lone male kob – the rangers call him Walter – who damaged his leg, perhaps during the relocation, now walks with a pronounced limp. He also seems to have developed something of an identity crisis because he

HOW TO VISIT KIDEPO NATIONAL PARK, UGANDA

WHEN TO GO

The best wildlife viewing months are during the dry seasons: June–September and December–February. At these times, the only permanent water source is in the Narus Valley, making it a prime wildlife watching location. The rainy season peaks in March–May, when travel can be difficult.

TOUR OPERATORS

Natural World Safaris (www.naturalworldsafaris.com) offers a five-night 'Kidepo by air Safari', priced from £2,310 per person sharing. Great Lakes Safaris (www.greatlakessafaris.com) offers a four-night Kidepo safari from £1,367 with road transfers. Locally based Buffalo Safari Camps (www.buffalosafaricamps.com) run a seven-day Murchison Falls and Kidepo Valley tour with 4x4 transport from £742.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Kidepo National Park is 840km from Kampala, a full day's drive away, or there is a light aircraft strip at Akopa. For more information on Kidepo, see www.safaribookings.com/tours/kidepo and www.visituganda.com.



hangs out with the herd of waterbuck around Apoka Safari Lodge. But perhaps he knows it's an ideal form of camouflage, since the fur of a waterbuck has an oily excretion that taints the meat and that's what makes it unpopular with lions. The lodge often seems to be almost over-run with lions, yet even with his obvious mobility problem Walter has so far avoided becoming the first Kidepo kob victim of a lion attack.

MISSED MEAL

"For now, the lions simply don't know what these new animals are," smiles Corrie Brits. "They've never seen or tasted them before. So hopefully the kob population will be well established before the cats figure out just how delicious kob could be to the lion palate."

In a village high on the mountain slopes, near the

The sedentary nature of grazing kob and their tendency to gather in open areas make them vulnerable to hunting. But at Kidepo they are protected.

2,749m peak of Mount Morungole, I met an elder of the Ik tribe by the name of Mzee Mateus Yeya Acok. The lions might be confused, but I wondered if he would recognise the new arrivals. Peering head-to-head into the back of my camera with Mzee Mateus, I asked him to look at several random animals from the valleys below and give me their Ik names...

"Aha. We call that one dorok," he exclaimed when I flicked to an image of a kob ram.

"I remember my grandfather's stories about hunting those," confirmed 60-year-old Mzee Hillary when I showed him the picture. "Of course, that was before Kidepo became a national park and we had to stop hunting and moved up here onto the mountain."

So it seems that the Kidepo kob are not recent colonists of a new range. They might actually be the first arrivals in a long overdue homecoming. 🐾



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