What would you do if you met a lion? MOSES NAMPALA describes his spine-chilling

Coming face-to-face with

Travelling through Karamoja region from Kaabong, along the Uganda-South Sudan border, to Mbale, by road could be a journey to remember.

The unique part of the countryside is that it has a landscape terrain, as flat as a football pitch, sparse short-thorny-shrub trees and in this time of the year, lush grass, stretching out as far as the eye can see.

Strangely, for a distance of more than 400 miles, the vehicle meanders through the Karamoja plains, there is hardly any trace of human habitation by the roadside, save for a few trading centres.

By the time our Land Cruiser arrived at Namalu, the last trading centre, south of the plains of Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve belt, it was already dark. We had barely driven a mile into the park, when our vehicle suddenly jerked back and forth before stopping.

"There you are!" Denis Ouma, our driver muttered, pleasantly surprised. The three of us had instinctively jumped out of our skins, almost simultaneously, with emotions bordering fright, alarm and shock, when a bright gleam of the headlamps of our vehicle, cast over the beast standing majestically in the middle of the dusty Moroto-Mbale feeder road.

"It is as handsome as my little cat back home, except for its size," Kenneth Oloka whispered in awe.

The brown beast with a bold mane royally dominating the edges of its face and neck, took its time sweepits red tongue around its mouth.

Further scrutiny reveals that the beast's mane was not fully developed.

Yet its facial features suggested that it must have been in the evening of its life. As if to assert its sense of dominion, its mane stiffened, eyes cringed to slits, then, it sauntered, advancing towards our stationary vehicle.

Its slow, but purposeful strides had led it to the bright right hand-side, headlamp of the vehicle we occupied.

Once there, it tipped back its head, tongue popping out, exposing its cream set of teeth. It licked, the glass enamel around the head lamp and, thereafter, regally strolled away, fading into wilderness. And there was a sigh of relief in the car.

The episode was etched in my mind, prompting me to approach authorities of Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve, a week later, seeking the profile of the brave, fierce and domineering member of the cat family. Up until that dramatic night, like many game animal enthusiasts, I believed that entire big cat family had been wiped out of the game reserve.

According to the Uganda Wildlife Authority chief warden, Fred Kizza, Pian Upe is among the game reserves that are recovering from a grim turbulent past.

When president Idi Amin Dada was ousted in the late 1970s, the Karimojong warriors took advantage of the confusion to kill animals.

"Poachers have continued to creep into the park, killing elephants, giraffes and lions," explains Kizza.

Chris Oryema, the principal warden in charge of Pian Upe game reserve, in an interview with the *New Vision* over on big cats said: "Our surveillance team says we are hosting three juvenile lions. We suspect that they trekked for months from Kidepo Valley National Park, in the northeast of the country, traversing southwards through Matheniko-Bokora game reserve and, finally, here," Oryema explained.

He says young lions migrate for adventure.

"Juvenile lions travel out of a sense of fantasy and love for adventure, born out of their agility."

Oryema adds that they also migrate when they can no longer stand physical taunts from elder lions that have divided the animal sanctuary amongst themselves into their own territories.

It is almost improbable that one would trace the rather discreet big cats in Pian Upe on a bright morning.

The vast expanse of Pian Upe is sandy, with a few patches of rock, a result of volcanic eruptions a million years ago. Many rocks have, however, since weathered, so much that some parts of the park would pass for a yard of debris.

There is hardly a tree with a height beyond 3ft, except the thorny shrubs and a few "elephant toothpicks" (Sansevieria).

At this time of the year, a sizeable proportion of the ground is a lawn of freshly sprouting grass over the scorched ones, creating abundant pasture for herbivorous game animals, such as zebras, deers and antelope.

A member of UWA surveillance crew said he had spotted the cats a few days ago, sauntering around shrub thickets on the edge of the Lake Opeta 45km west of the game reserve.

Moments later, the UWA truck we occupied set out for the western end of the game reserve. Although the journey was fruitless, as we failed to locate the cats, none among us regretted having tried. We were consoled by a rare game species, the shoebill stork that we had not bargained for.

I learnt from my host that the fragile ecosystem of the wetland around Lake Opeta, is the only breeding ground for these bird species.

"Until we embarked on a spirited campaign to sensitise the fishermen and establish a structure to protect the sanctuary of the birds, the fishermen used to wade through the wetlands, wrecking nests, which explains the dwindling population of the birds across the country," observes Oryema, regretfully.

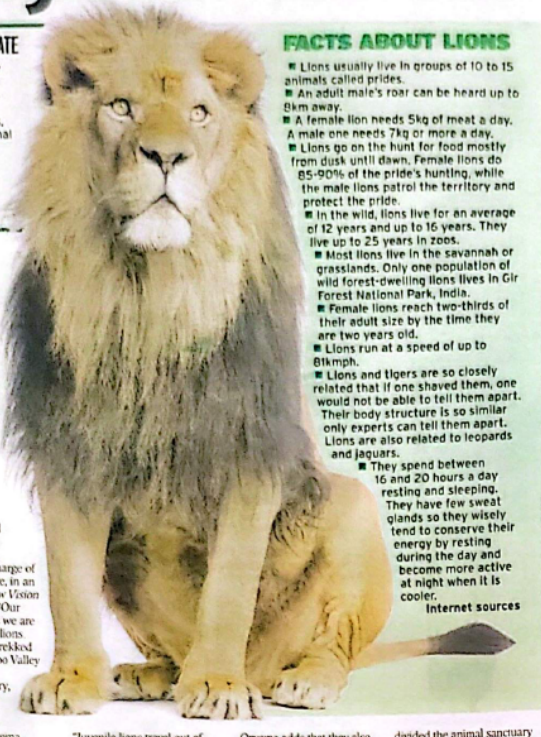
The shoebill stork, which is catalogued among big flying birds, stands at about a foot high. It has an unusually, huge and thick and hooked beak.

A shoebill stands looking at us with dull sad eyes that lend it a chronically grim look that suggests vulnerability.

James Odwor, a fisherman, explains that apart from God designing the shoebill's mouth to scoop fish from the lake, he gave it a sharp sight that can enable it to spot its prey from afar in seconds.

He adds: "One can spend a day here without catching any fish, but you can be sure to spot a shoebill."

"When it gets hungry, it hovers around the lake and, in just a few minutes, catches a fish, more than enough for its day's meal," explains Odwor, with a chuckle.



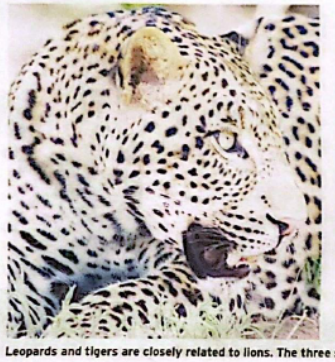
WHY THEY MIGRATE

- Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve is hosting three juvenile lions suspected to have trekked for months, from Kidepo National Park. Young lions mainly migrate for adventure and to avoid territorial battles with elder lions.

FACTS ABOUT LIONS

- Lions usually live in groups of 10 to 15 animals called prides.
- An adult male's roar can be heard up to 8km away.
- A female lion needs 5kg of meat a day. A male one needs 7kg or more a day.
- Lions go on the hunt for food mostly from dusk until dawn. Female lions do 85-90% of the pride's hunting, while the male lions patrol the territory and protect the pride.
- In the wild, lions live for an average of 12 years and up to 16 years. They live up to 25 years in zoos.
- Most lions live in the savannah or grasslands. Only one population of wild forest-dwelling lions lives in Gir Forest National Park, India.
- Female lions reach two-thirds of their adult size by the time they are two years old.
- Lions run at a speed of up to 81kmph.
- Lions and tigers are so closely related that if one shaved them, one would not be able to tell them apart. Their body structure is so similar only experts can tell them apart. Lions are also related to leopards and jaguars.
- They spend between 16 and 20 hours a day resting and sleeping. They have few sweat glands so they wisely tend to conserve their energy by resting during the day and become more active at night when it is cooler.

Internet sources





Leopards and tigers are closely related to lions. The three species and jaguars are in the cat family

shock and delight at his encounter with the dreaded beast and its fascinating lifestyle

the king of the jungle

PROFILE OF PIAN UPE

Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve is a protected conservation area for wild animals located in Karamoja sub-region, northeast of Uganda.

It was gazetted by the colonial administration in 1958.

The reserve covers an area of about 2,788 sq.km to the north of Mountain Elgon and it is now under the management of Mt. Elgon conversation area.

It lies in a semi-arid county that usually receives rainfall in April and from June to early September; although, in some years, it hardly rains.

Most of the game reserve is covered by undisturbed grassland and wooded grassland.

Among the tree species of its vegetation include red acacia, desert date and harrison habisonia abyssinica.

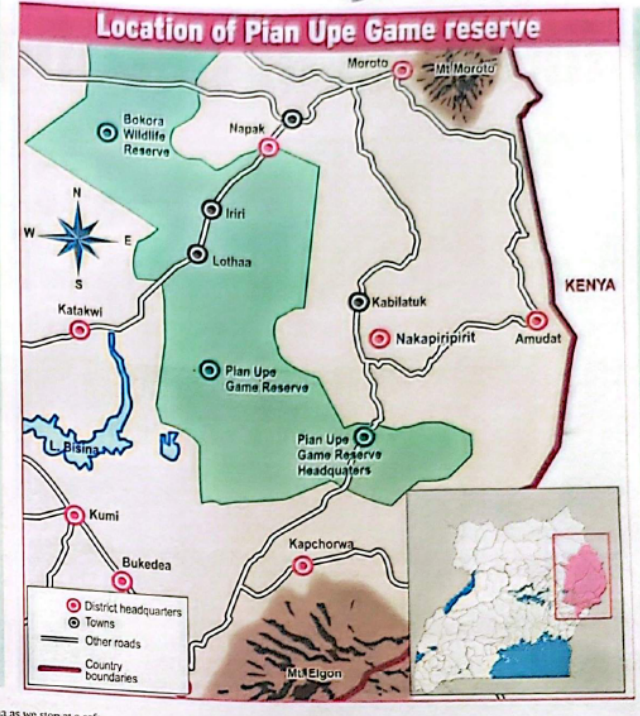
Although the game reserve once hosted large mammalsh among them elephants, giraffes, black rhinos, they are now extinct.

However, it still hosts smaller mammals, such as zebras, elands, and antelopes.

The game reserve is also home to many unique reptiles, including monitor lizards and African rock cobra.

The wetland around Lake Opeta in Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve is a breeding ground for bird species, such as the shoebill stork.

Location of Pian Upe Game reserve



Retreating from Lake Opeta, we headed for Napedet hills, south of the game reserve, as we pursued yet another lead from a local UWA link.

As we cruise past an expansive patch of dry grass, we startle a swarm of guinea fowl, their wings flapping loudly as they scamper in disarray at the rude invasion. A herd of antelopes can be seen browsing in dry grass.

At the sound of our rambling engine, the antelopes prick up their ears in curiosity. They stop grazing and gaze at us intently.

"Over there," one of the rangers shouted as we reached Napedet hill.

Lady Luck must have been on our side for we finally caught a glimpse of the cats. The three of them were patched on a rock hill that overlooks the plains.

"They must have chosen to take a panoramic view in order to spot some prey for their day's meal," observes Oryema as we stop at a safe distance. Undaunted by our presence, the cats go about their business.

It was not long before they tactfully crept, into the grass beneath the rocky hill, tip-toeing and resolutely chased after a deer.

Their prey, having sensed the danger, sprinted out of their sight and the three lions gave up their pursuit, retreating back to their spot.

According to Kizza, unlike their cousins, the leopards and cheetahs that prefer solitary hunting, young lions hunt in a group.

"A big catch, such as a buffalo would see them relieved from the awful chore of hunting for a week," he observes. Oryema observes that a lion learns, by instinct, the common routes and hang-out places of its prey.

"Once it perceives the routes, it also marks the time when it is more likely to get a catch.

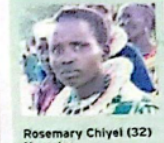


The three young lions that have migrated to Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve

WHAT PEOPLE SAY



Jane Laim (28), Namalu:
I had never seen a lion, until early this month. The encounter with the big cats happened two weeks ago. My friends and I had set out to look for firewood when, suddenly, we saw two of the big cats. They briefly stared at us and went their way.



Rosemary Chiyel (32) Namalu:
I have seen the lions more than three times in the last three weeks, but I realised they were harmless. The first time, was late in the evening when I was returning from the nearby borehole. It stopped, looked on then decided to give me way as it went off into the bush by the road side. The other two times ignored it and it too reciprocated, going about its business.



Ann Lokeris:
The presence of the big cats is not new since we have co-existed with many other fierce wild animals, such as the cheetah and leopards. We, including our children that spend tin grazing live stock in th fields encounter such wild animals regularly, but we have not registered any inciden of attacks.

CamScanner