

# The Hot Zone



## Of Local Interest

### Parc National de Waza

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Photos by J. Serpa &  
from the Park's website

Located in northern Cameroon approximately 140 Km southwest of Kousseri, the *Parc National de Waza* is generally considered to be one of the best sites for savanna game-viewing in West Africa. The park was established in 1934 by the French Colonial Administration as a 1,600 Km<sup>2</sup> hunting reserve. One year later, the park was enlarged to its current 1,700 Km<sup>2</sup> (nearly two thirds the size of Rhode Island.) In 1968, it was elevated to National Park by the Government of Cameroon and in 1979 to a Man and Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO. Finally, in April 2006, the Government of Cameroon submitted the request to have the park on UNESCO's list of World Heritage sites (a decision on which is still pending.)

#### General features

The northeastern half of the park is located in the floodplain of the Logone River. Here, the topography is extremely flat (height variations in the centimeters), and the clay soils are prone to seasonal inundations. The southwestern half of the park is situated on the sandy deposits of the fringe of the Lake Chad basin. This area of



the park which never floods is about 20 meters higher than the northeastern one, and is slightly undulating (height variations of a few meters.) The only exceptions to this state of affairs are the three isolated hills

(inselbergs) at the Waza village, near the main entrance to the park.

The park is characterized by two types of vegetation: perennial grasses in the open, flooded grasslands, or *yaérés*, in its northeastern half (where trees are absent and fires are common) and open to dense woodland savanna on the other half. Of the four sub-types of woodland savanna that make-up this second half, one is of particular importance: the savanna dominated by the *Acacia seyal* that predominates in the black clay Karal soils that surround the floodplain and which are saturated with water in the rainy season.

The climate of the region is semi-arid, with a dry season from October to May. Rainfall is irregular with an annual mean of close to 600 mm. As far as tempera-



tures, December is the coolest month (mean min and max of 16°C and 33°C respectively), and April is the hottest (mean min and max of 21°C and 41°C respectively)

#### Birds & Mammals

The park is renowned for its biodiversity. In total 379 bird species



have been identified in it. About 6% of the total world population of black crowned crane resides in the park. The park is also an important sanctuary for water bird species, of which, the four largest populations are: white-faced whistling duck, spur-winged

goose, garganey, and knob-billed duck.

There are at least 30 species of mammals in the park, including elephant, giraffe, lion, two species of hyenas, warthog, various species of antelopes and gazelles, in addition to other smaller or less abundant species. Almost equally as impressive is the list of species that have become locally extinct over the last few decades: leopard, cheetah, waterbuck, bushbuck, and red flanked duiker. Declining trends in antelope numbers in the park can be explained by the cumulative effects of the construction of the Maga dam in 1979, declining rainfall figures after 1980, and the impact of rinderpest during 1980-1990. It is also generally believed that the recent decrease in number of game guards (from 30 in 1980 to only 8 in 2000) may have led to increased poaching.



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#### The Elephant issue

The existence of elephants in the park is a rather new thing. As a matter of fact, it is not until 1947 that the first herds of elephants crossed the Logone from Chad and settled in Waza. Since then the



elephant population has steadily increased, not only due to natural growth, but also to subsequent immigration from Chad and Nigeria. In the dry season, the elephants feed mostly on

*Acacia seyal*. The presence of a large number of elephants in the park became a serious concern because it was feared that they would decimate the acacia woodlands. Acacias are also the major food source for giraffes in Waza, so it was feared that the giraffe population would also disappear. In response, the authorities put in place a culling operation: from 1968 to 1973, 60 to 80 elephants (out of an estimated population of 500 to 600) were shot each year. (Today elephants are still shot by sport hunters around the park, but the quota is much lower.) Whether or not the elephants pose a mortal threat to the acacias in the park remains a subject of scientific dispute. Recent studies done on the *Acacia tortilis* in Tanzania seem to confirm that the rejuvenation of acacia woodlands is possible. It remains to be studied if similar mechanisms apply to the *Acacia seyal* of Waza.

But damage to the acacias is not the only problem caused by greater numbers of elephants in Waza. During the dry season the amount of food found in floodplains of the park is insufficient to feed all the herds. This insufficiency leads some herds to search for food outside the park. Originally, this movement was towards the north, but the completion of the Maga dam in 1979 changed this pattern. Elephant movement in the southern (and more densely populated) direction was first documented in 1980, when a herd of 30 animals was reported roaming in the Mindif area. Since then, elephants continued to move in increasingly larger numbers to the south (rather than to the north.) During these migrations, elephants increasingly come in conflict with local communities, destroying their crops, damaging their properties, and even killing people.

#### The Lion issue

In 1990s, the lion population of the park was estimated (by educated guesses) to be from 30 to 60 lions, with a mean of 50. These figures were consistent with various other educated guess estimates done previously, namely 50 to 60 lions both in 1962 and

1988 and 40 to 50 lions in 1986. (Note that these figures are order of magnitude only and cannot be used to do a meaningful trend analysis on the number of lions.)

Lions are a threatened species in West Africa. As a flagship species, this outlook is of great concern to all. On the other hand, lions are a problem to humans, because they prey upon livestock, a serious phenomenon especially to the south of the park. Annually, lions kill nearly 700 cattle and over 1,000 small stock, with most losses (62%) being reported from the south side of the park. (For comparison, the total number of livestock killed by lions and hyenas combined is more or less equal to livestock losses due to diseases.)

#### Tourism & related

In the 1996/1997 season, the number of tourists visiting the park was around 5,400. The long-term goal of park officials is to raise this number to 12,000 visits per year. Of the tourist visiting the park, 15% are Cameroon nationals, 25% are residents, and 60% are non-residents. The average length of a visit is 3 days, and the elephants are the number one attraction for the visitors.

Entry fees to the park are as follow: 1,500 CFA per person for nationals; 3,000 CFA per person for residents; 5,000 CFA per person for non-resident; 2,000 CFA per vehicle; and 2,000 CFA per photo or video camera. In addition it is mandatory to have one official guide per vehicle (plan at least 5,000 CFA per guide.)



On accommodations, the park proposes three alternatives: the *Campement* (50 rooms, most of them with a/c, in typical *boukarous* set on one of the small hills near the entrance of the park); the *Centre d'Accueil* (much more modest in comfort); and the *Relais Porte Mayo* (a popular and more luxurious place, but in Maroua, i.e., 120 km south of the park.) The most popular choice is the *Campement*. The level of comfort is quite acceptable, the service is not bad, the views are astonishing, and the prices are right: 16,000 CFA for a double room, 2,000 CFA for breakfast, and approximately 6,000 CFA per meal for lunch or dinner (BYOB).

#### Curiosity

From 1990 to 1992, the Embassy of the United States in Yaoundé, Cameroon, gave the park a substantial amount of material, including a vehicle, motorcycles, bicycles, radios, and miscellaneous camping material.

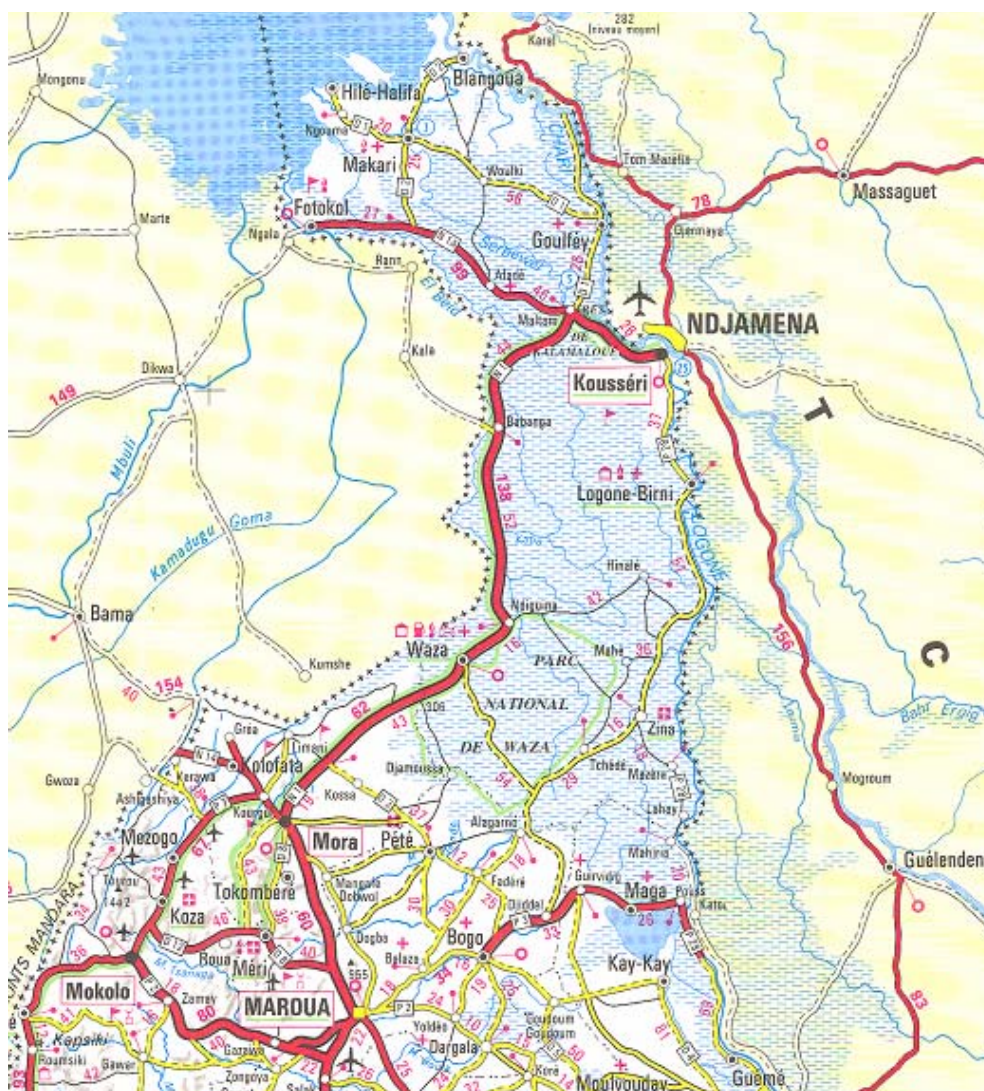
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### *Parc National de Waza*

... But how do I get there?



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