

# in Malawi

Part III

As darkness fell, the jungle noises changed, from the earlier chirp of birds and bellow of the male Impala, to a more atmospheric sound of rustling leaves (who was out there?), crickets chirping, distant shrill cries of the monkeys, and the occasional cough of an unidentified animal. Our spotter, Henry, brought out his huge searchlight, and informed us that we would now start looking for nocturnal animals. A long time passed without sighting much. Then, to my sudden shock, came our first break. The light shone on a hippo, barely ten feet away from us, as it crossed the road. My heart stopped at the thought of how nearly we could have collided with it, since it really came out of nowhere, but I suppose Henry would have spotted it long before!

We continued on, passing more herds of Impala. Shortly afterwards, we came across two hippos walking together, presumably to get a late evening snack on the juicy grasses of the jungle. They were both sweating profusely, a reminder of how much harder it must be to drag that bulk around on land, as opposed to their graceful movements in the water. One was also bleeding, not that strange since hippos are very aggressive and



often fight amongst themselves. It is also interesting that they often hang out in packs in the river, but are mostly seen traveling individually on land. Henry explained this by saying that while hippos like to be social when they are keeping cool in the water, on land they are unsure of getting enough to eat, so that they like to be on their own and not risk having to share.

Gradually I started noticing that sometimes you could see small yellow eyes glowing in the underbrush. I was reminded that there were leopards and lions in the park, and suddenly the (so far) reclusive hippos did not seem that intimidating. We came across a series of smaller animals, including various cats, and a young side-striped jackal (which was quite oblivious to our presence, enjoying its game of teasing a frog). Then it was back to the Camp, and to the last remnants of Impala. The male Impala was not glad to see us again, and his bellowing warning echoed around the area. The surprises weren't over though. Just as we were about to get out of the jeep, our drivers warned us to be careful. As the

searchlight cut a path through the darkness surrounding us, we saw a hippo standing just outside the children's playground! The hippo looked as surprised as we felt, but it held its ground, an excellent illustration of the Camp authorities insistence on being generally careful!

Dinner was a leisurely business, and we were mostly quiet, reflective about the many interesting things we had just seen. I fell asleep quite soon after, but the surprises were not over for the night! I was woken in the early hours of the morning by a strange, rhythmic noise. Looking out of the wire screen just outside my bed, I was amazed to see a large hippo standing there and eating grass. I watched for a long time, as the moonlight shone on the grazing hippo, which moved between our cabin and the neighbouring one. It was a magical time, and I did not even feel worried, as it seemed so totally unaware of our presence...

