

The Simien—Ethiopia's new National Park

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Sixty square miles of the Simien Mountains, home of two of Ethiopia's most seriously endangered wild mammals, the walia ibex and Simien fox, both endemics, has at last been declared a national park. The author, who was Wildlife Adviser to the Ethiopian Government from 1965–70 (he has just gone in a similar capacity to Nepal) has worked unceasingly to achieve this as well as other parks and reserves to protect Ethiopia's still remarkably rich wildlife. This is the second national park to be gazetted in Ethiopia; the Awash park, which the FPS African tour visited in February this year, was declared early in 1968.

In October 1969 the Simien National Park was officially established by Imperial Proclamation—a significant step forward in the hitherto painfully slow progress of wildlife conservation in Ethiopia. Although sixty square miles in extent, it comprises a comparatively small part of the whole Simien massif, but includes a major portion of the northern escarpment, the tremendous rock wall over 20 miles long and 4,000–5,000 feet high which is the last remaining habitat of the walia ibex *Capra walie*. The most seriously threatened of Ethiopia's several endemic species, the walia occurs only in Simien, and the new national park offers renewed hope for its survival and an increase in its precariously low numbers. Two other endemic mammals, the gelada baboon *Theropithecus gelada* and the Simien fox *Simenia simensis*, will also get protection in Simien.

The Simien Mountains are the denuded remnants of a huge Hawaiian-type volcano at the northern end of the main Ethiopian plateau, about 90 miles north-east of Lake Tana and some 60 miles from the ancient Imperial capital of Gondar (approximately 38°E and 13°N). To the north, east and south its approaches are guarded by the deep valleys of the Takazze River and its tributaries, which skirt the foothills like a defensive moat, while to the west the main Gondar–Asmara highway climbs to the village of Davarik on the edge of the massif before plunging down the tortuous Wolchehit Pass towards Adi Arkay and the Takazze Valley. To the east, outside the park, stands Ras Dajan, Ethiopia's highest peak (15,158 feet).

Climbing from the Takazze Valley to the heights of Simien one traverses many of Ethiopia's vegetational zones, from the acacia savanna and thorn scrub typical of the lowlands to the sub-alpine flora of the high mountains. In the lower valleys and on the broad terraces beneath the great northern escarpment cultivation has almost obliterated the natural vegetation, though relict stands of *Hagenia*, wild olive and pencil cedar indicate that these were probably once the dominant tree species up to an altitude of about 10,000 feet. Between 10,000 and 11,000

feet St John's wort *Hypericum* sp. is dominant in association with giant heath *Erica arborea*, *Rosa abyssinica*, *Echinops* and other species, though again little now remains of the original vegetation except in a few less accessible valleys. At higher elevations the giant heath becomes dominant in association with *Danthonia* grassland; on the bleak wind-swept plateau one finds *Lobelia*, *Alchemilla*, *Helichrysum* and other characteristic Afro-alpine plants in association with open tussock grassland, with stunted patches of giant heath on more sheltered sites.

Of the three endemic Ethiopian mammals in the park, the walia ibex, which occurs nowhere else, most urgently needs protection. In 1968, Dr Bernhard Nievergelt, at the end of his twelve-month study of the walia (financed by the World Wildlife Fund) estimated a total of, at most, 150 animals. Since then illegal hunting has certainly continued, with an almost inevitable further decline in numbers. From the writings of sportsmen and other visitors it is clear that the walia's range has been much reduced in the last 40–50 years, and it is now found in only two areas: the northern escarpment between Sankabar and Amba Ras, which is included in the new park and contains the larger population; and the area of Silki, Abba Yared and Walia Kand to the north-east where the population is now so small and isolated that there seems little hope of its survival. The hundred or so walia within the new park are breeding well and appear to have a good chance of survival and of extending their range, provided that they can be protected against hunting and disturbance, and that further destruction of the already seriously depleted habitat can be prevented. But numbers are now so seriously reduced that they must be perilously near the critical point of no return; failure to provide immediate and effective protection for both the walia and its habitat can only result in its early extinction.

Of the other two endemic mammals, the Simien fox—sometimes misleadingly referred to as the Abyssinian wolf—is now so rarely seen that it appears in even more serious danger of extinction than the walia. It occurs also in the Bale and Arussi mountains in southern Ethiopia, but the Simien fox of the south is regarded as a separate race *Simenia simensis citernii* from that of Simien itself. The third endemic species, the gelada baboon, is fortunately an adaptable animal, apparently little affected by habitat changes or human disturbance. It is surprisingly abundant—often to be seen in troops of 200–300—and obviously in no danger either in Simien or other parts of its range. Other mammals in the park include klipspringer *Oreotragus oreotragus* whose habitat coincides approximately with that of the walia, duiker *Sylvicapra grimmia*, bushbuck *Tragelaphus scriptus*, colobus monkey *Colobus abyssinicus*, hamadryas baboon *Comopithecus hamadryas*, serval *Felis serval*, leopard *Panthera pardus*, hyrax *Procavia* sp. and an abundance of small rodents which dwell in large colonies and are found at all elevations. The local people also tell of a 'gazelle-like' animal which occurred on the moorland areas within living memory but has now disappeared. One can only guess, but it is possible this was the mountain reedbuck *Redunca fulvorufula*.

The birds of Simien are abundant and varied with many birds of

prey, including the magnificent lammergeyer *Gypaëtus barbatus*, which is unusually common, the augur buzzard *Buteo rufofuscus augur*, Rüppell's griffon vulture *Gyps rüppellii*, lappet-faced vulture *Torgos tracheliotus*, and Verreaux's eagle *Aquila verreauxi*. Endemic species include thick-billed raven *Corvus crassirostris*, wattled ibis *Bostrychia carunculata* and white-collared pigeon *Columba albitorques*, the last one of the unforgettable sights of Simien as the birds plunge over the brink of the escarpment in close formation to perform breath-taking aerobic gyrations in the course of their rocket-like descent into the void beneath. Other interesting birds are the slender-billed chestnut-winged starling *Onychognathus tenuirostris*, Takazze sunbird *Nectarinia takazze*, mountain chats in large numbers, and the chough *Pyrhhorcorax pyrrhcorax*, common in Simien.

Preparing for the Tourist

For mountain scenery Simien is one of the most spectacular places in the world; certainly there is nothing else in Africa to compare with it for grandeur. It is ideal country for pony-trekking and the development of wilderness trails, which have proved so successful in United States parks, and horses are readily available locally. A superb site on the edge of the escarpment at about 10,000 ft has been selected for a mountain-lodge type of hotel, and sites have been chosen for a series of mountain huts to provide simple accommodation for the more adventurous visitor wishing to explore on foot or horseback. With proper development the Simien park could soon become one of Ethiopia's top tourist attractions, particularly as it is conveniently situated close to the 'historic route' between Gondar and Axum, and would therefore fit in well with existing proposals for expanding tourist facilities. But to achieve this the Ethiopian government will have to take immediate and effective action.

Most urgent are the construction of a motorable access road from Davarik to the park area, a distance of about 12 miles; removal and resettlement of the 700 people at present living inside the park, for whom alternative land has already been found; introduction of national park legislation, as already drafted, and demarcation of boundaries; establishment of game guards' outposts round the foot of the escarpment to prevent poaching, disturbance and habitat destruction resulting from burning, tree-cutting and grazing by domestic stock. If these conditions are fulfilled Simien could well become one of the most popular mountain national parks in Africa. But if action is not taken soon it will be too late. The walia ibex and other unique wildlife will disappear, and this splendid opportunity will be lost for ever.

References

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Plates 14 & 15
WALIA IBEX. One of
Ethiopia's rare endemic
species which will be
protected in the new
Simien National Park.
Fritz Vollmar (above) and
John Blower/*J. Allan Cas*



Plate 16

SIMIEN. Part of the dramatic escarpment in Ethiopia's new national

park and home of the walla ibes. *John Bower*



FIJI IGUANA—a gravid female. Overleaf (plate 19) the male.

Plate 17

ON MATAGI—a Fijian beach where hawksbill turtles nest.

Plate 18





Plate 19
Male
Iguana