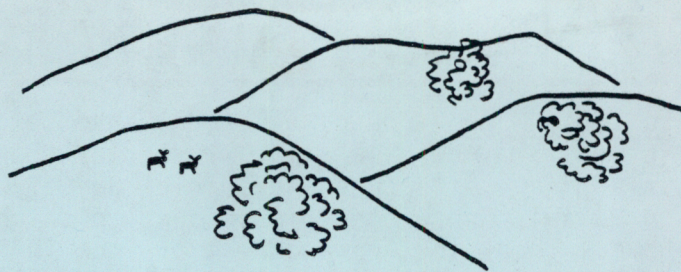


back, his ears just visible above the yellow-brown grass.

Needless to say, the 'short-cut' descends steeply down to a small stream and ascends even more vertically on the other side, up through tall dry grass, bracken and small trees with flaky red bark and hairy soft green leaves (nature's wilderness kleenex). This tree, the Hagenia abyssinica, grows around the edges of existing forest patches, playing an important role as a forest regenerator.



Nyika Plateau ; rolling grassland interrupted by dark green evergreen clumps

Puffing and perspiring, I clamour my way to the top of the plateau, making frequent stops to scan the horizons and hills for the elusive leopard. For him to be out hunting at three o'clock in the afternoon, his biological cycle would have to be distinctly upset, but this feeble excuse for a stop at least allows my heart rate to drop below 140 beats per minute at periodic intervals on my way up.

But finally the summit is reached and the orange-red clay road to Chilinda is in sight. I am just in time to catch a glimpse of the crimson flight feathers of a violet crested loerie, gliding among the trees along the road. Being a very secretive bird, it quickly disappears into the thick foliage of a nearby Parinari tree.

The terrain now changes from sub-montane to montane grassland, making game **sighting** and walking much more enjoyable. A partially albino reed buck catches my eye, and draws my attention to a small herd grazing on a far hill. Reed buck are medium-sized antelope with shaggy yellowish-brown fur. They make excellent food for leopards and again I scan with my binoculars for that elusive crouched cat-like form. I see something move! No, it is just another red forest duiker. I have been fooled before by their small red-brown forms creeping through the grass.

On my right, two more zebra gallop out of sight and I notice in the distance a large cloud of smoke and an area of burned grassland. Each year early in the dry season (April - May) park staff deliberately burn a certain amount of the plateau grassland to form fire breaks. This measure protects the evergreen forests from more damaging fires. But this fire today has most probably been set by poachers. Poaching is a major problem within all of Africa. Even within protected National Parks, poaching is still prevalent and threatens the rhino and possibly the cheetah and elephant with extinction in the near future.

Looking away from the smoke, I see a large augur buzzard circling, its slate grey underparts and bright unbarred chestnut tail making it easily recognizable. It suddenly descends, pouncing on some unfortunate rodent. Just near by, almost hidden in the tall grass, five bush pigs seem intent on digging up roots and bulbs for supper. As they are mainly nocturnal animals, I am lucky to have seen them.

The sun creeps lower in the western sky, and I can't believe my eyes when a small wooden sign post states "Chilinda 4 miles"! I pick up my pace, not only to cover the distance more quickly, but also to keep warm. The temperature drops as quickly as the sun on Nyika. But the golden-orange colours on the grassland are well worth the discomfort of the cold, and my eye travels to distant hills where numerous reed buck graze. Infrequently, I hear their loud shrill whistles of alarm and I can't resist scanning quickly, in the hope that the warning may have been caused by that still unseen spotted beast.