

AN ISLANDER ABROAD

Editor's Note - One day in late September I was pleasantly surprised to receive a letter from Ann MacPhail, a member of the P.E.I. Natural History Society travelling in Africa. After one incredible day of wildlife-watching in Nyika National Park in Malawi, Ann wrote this account to share her experiences with NHS members back home. Thank-you Ann and best of luck in finding your leopard!

ONE DAY ON NYIKA

by Ann MacPhail, Nyika National Park, Malawi (July 22, 1983)

Nyika Plateau is situated in the northwestern corner of Malawi. In 1965 the area was declared Malawi's first national park, in an effort to conserve what remained of the country's montane grasslands and evergreen forests, including the most southern stand of juniper in Africa. Due to its elevation (extending from 1900 m in the escarpment region to the peak of Mt. Nganda at 2602 m) and associated cloudiness, Nyika has a moist temperate climate, a sharp contrast to the tropical continental climate of the surrounding regions. The climate has the immediate impact of reminding any wandering Canadian traveller of Canada. Evergreens and zero temperatures - who would have thought such a place existed in Africa!

Combined with the temperate climate and plateau terrain, Nyika has been surprisingly blessed with a wide array of commonly found African wildlife. Mammals range from the exotic leopard frequenting the evergreen stands, all the way down to the checkered elephant shrew. In addition there is a wide array of birds, reptiles, amphibians and insects. Some of these species, responding to the uniqueness of the Nyika environment, have evolved into distinct sub-species and, in a few cases, separate species only to be found in Nyika.

To make the stay complete, Nyika offers one other area of uniqueness, and that is to allow visitors to wander freely through the park on foot. This opportunity I enthusiastically took advantage of by planning a day walk from the Nyika Rest House (actually situated in the neighbouring Zambian Nyika National Park) to Chilinda, ten miles further up on the plateau.

The morning begins cool but bright, the warm sun quickly melting the heavy frost deposited the night before by the -3°C temperature. A lesser double-collared sunbird, its brilliant purple and red chest bands reflecting the morning sun, rests for a moment on a branch just outside the window where I sip my morning tea. A pair of bronze sunbirds is busy having breakfast on a nearby Erythrina tree, its orange blossoms contrasting beautifully with the metallic bronze-green plumage of the sunbirds. And another sunbird, this time the brilliant emerald-green malachite, flits erratically into view, seeming just a little upset with all the attention the other members of his family have been receiving.

By two o'clock, the temperature has risen to 22°C , and after a restful morning, I strike out across the sub-montane terrain. For the first part I follow a meandering reed buck trail which the local people have assured me is one of the 'shortcuts' to Chilinda. Africans love shortcuts, no matter how difficult!

As I skirt around a clump of evergreens, a startled Burchelli zebra (I don't know who was more startled, the zebra or I) emerges from the bracken, charges across the path directly in front of me, and gallops off. I watch his black and white stripes disappear over the crest of a nearby hill, and only then do I see him stop and look

