

‘A pleasant surprise’

Iregi Mwenja is the first to admit how taken aback he was at the findings of his own pioneering survey of a ‘satellite’ De Brazza’s Monkey population on Kenya’s Mathews Range.

The conservation status in Kenya of the De Brazza’s Monkey, *Cercopithecus neglectus*, has received a major boost following completion – earlier this year – of the preliminary phase of my ongoing field survey of the population of these monkeys living on and around the Mathews Range north of Mount Kenya in Samburu District.

Astonishingly, the very existence of this ‘eastern’ De Brazza’s population had escaped the notice of previous researchers. Indeed, this population remained entirely unheralded until as recently as 2000, when Helen Douglas-Dufresne and Grete Davey – who were on a camel safari in the area – saw a group of the monkeys in thick forest on the lower western flank of the massif.

At the time, their report of the sighting met with some skepticism, inasmuch as the De Brazza’s Monkey had long been considered to be a ‘western’ species; one that you might expect to encounter only to the west of the (Eastern) Great Rift Valley. More than four years later, however, in November 2004, Douglas-Dufresne – on another safari on the Mathews Range, this time with Willy Roberts – came back with hard evidence, in the shape of several photographs of the monkeys, two of which

were subsequently reproduced in SWARA (Vol.28 No. 2; 2005).

I had then, only months before, completed a detailed survey of the De Brazza’s Monkey populations in Kenya. In the course of that survey, I had – over a two-year period – found and counted groups of the monkeys (including several not previously documented) at locations throughout western Kenya. I had come to the conclusion that there were at least 500, and possibly as many as 600, of the monkeys in Kenya. Most of these populations were in isolated forest fragments where, for want of any formal protection, their continued survival was (and still is) extremely precarious. Nevertheless, my findings (published in SWARA Vol. 27 No. 4; 2004) represented an increase of around 50 % on previous scientific estimates for the total number of De Brazza’s Monkeys left in Kenya.

News of the ‘satellite’ De Brazza’s population on the Mathews Range, well to the east of the Rift Valley, presented me with a fresh challenge. In 2005 I resolved to carry out the first ever survey of this isolated population, and to document its range and conservation status.

The findings, to date, of this ongoing investigation have been nothing short





of astonishing. With the help of 18 field scouts, all drawn from the local Samburu community, I have been able to locate 162 De Brazza's Monkeys distributed in 24 troops beside 14 separate *luggas* (dry river beds).

This gives the 93,000-ha Forest Reserve on the Mathews (Lenkiyio) Range the distinction of harbouring the highest number of De Brazza's Monkeys found in any of Kenya's Protected Areas. What is more, this

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represents a conservative estimate, given that field monitoring is still in progress, and reported sightings of additional groups are continuing to trickle in.

It is likely that the total De Brazza's population on the Mathews Range, once this can be verified, will number in excess of 200 animals – and possibly even as many as 300. This would make the forests of the Mathews Range home to more than 20 % of all the De Brazza's Monkeys left in Kenya today.

Areas surveyed where the species was found to be present include both tracts of forest interior at higher elevations (Napurwaso, Olkaera, Manoea, Rapaelpapit Nachapa, Kiserian, Kojos, Ntukunda, and Wamba) and of peripheral low-lying forest (Nkii, Murit, Miwaa, Sitin, Ngare Narok, and Ngare Naibor). Finding a troop of the monkeys at Olkaera – 2,200 metres (or 7,200 feet) above sea level – came as a particular surprise in that elsewhere the species has not been recorded at altitudes much above 2,050 metres (about 6,700 feet).

From the isolated southern peak of Uarges standing 2,688 metres, (or 8,820 feet, above sea level), which towers over Wamba, 150 km north of Mount Kenya, the Mathews Range (high point: Ol Doinyo Lenkiyio, 2,375 metres / 7,792 ft above sea level) extends northward for nearly 60 km. Only the Milgis Lugga separates the massif from the Ndoto Mountains, still further to the north. Credible reports of De Brazza's Monkey sightings on the Ndotos, now under investigation, could, if verified, extend still further the species' range in Kenya.

Anthropogenic activities within the Mathews Forest Reserve interior still pose only a minimal threat to the monkeys and their habitat, but there are disturbing

signs around the lower forest verges of encroachment and habitat destruction. Some areas (Ngare Narok, Nkii, Sitin Miwaa, and Murit) that are traditionally occupied by pastoralists and their herds during the dry seasons have become noticeably degraded. Here, the lower branches of many of the trees favoured by De Brazza's Monkeys, such as *Faidherbia albida* and *Olea* and *Ficus* spp., have been lopped off for use as cattle fodder.

Another worrying threat comes from the increased frequency here, during the dry seasons, of persistent forest fires, many of which the herdsmen are lighting deliberately in a bid to trigger pasture regeneration, to control bush expansion, and to kill ticks. Careless honey hunters are also to blame for starting some of the forest fires.

I found no evidence of any physical persecution of the De Brazza's Monkeys. (In parts of western Kenya, by contrast, persecution of the species, which is widely hunted, snared, or sometimes even poisoned, has become commonplace.)

While the killing of wild animals for food may be taboo in Samburu culture, I did find that another of the area's primates – the little-known endemic Mount Uarges Guereza, *Colobus guereza* ssp. *percivali* – is sometimes killed for its skin, which is still prized as attire in some cultural ceremonies.

I have, meanwhile, since compiling the report of my western Kenya survey, *A De-tailed De Brazza's Survey in Western Kenya: Focus on Vulnerable Groups outside Protected Areas* (2004), been able to authenticate reports from western Kenya of the presence of a number of other, previously undocumented De Brazza's groups. I am now satisfied that there could be as many as 700 of the monkeys, and possibly even more, in western Kenya. Most of these groups are severely threatened, however. So, while my current estimate is higher than the estimates arrived at by previous researchers, it does not mean to imply that this population is growing, or even stable. It is just that I have been able to include in my census numerous, isolated populations whose existence had hitherto not been recorded.

Against this background, the discovery of a relatively stable and secure satellite De Brazza's Monkey population in Samburu District's Mathews Range came as a very pleasant surprise. The reality (borne out by my ongoing research) that this satellite population is far larger than many of us would ever have dared to imagine is of course doubly gratifying!

Iregi Mwenja is Lead Investigator on the Samburu Primate Research and Conservation Project. For their support towards this project, he is especially grateful to the Institute of Primate Research at the National Museums of Kenya, Conservation International's Primates Action Fund, Fauna and Flora International's Flagship Species Fund, Rufford (Small Grants for Nature Conservation), the Eden Wildlife Trust, and the East African Wildlife Society, as well as to all the members of the Milgis Trust, and to Lengulate, Lesipiti, Lesong'o, Lesiyampe, Lolokuria, Lenakukuya, and all the field scouts who, month after month, continue to monitor, and to collect data on, their area's De Brazza's Monkeys.

Details of the findings outlined in this article are contained in Iregi Mwenja's full report, called *Distribution and Conservation Status of the De Brazza's Monkey (Cercopithecus neglectus)* in the Mathews Range Forest Reserve in Kenya's Samburu District, which was completed in February 2007, and copies of which are available for perusal in the library of the East African Wild Life Society. For more information, Iregi Mwenja can be reached via e-mail on <iregim@yahoo.com>.