

9-6-1986

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Recommended Citation

Butynski, T. M. (1986). Elephants in the Impenetrable (Bwindi) Forest, Uganda. *Elephant*, 2(2), 42-43. Doi: 10.22237/elephant/1521731999

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ELEPHANTS IN THE IMPENETRABLE (BWINDI) FOREST, UGANDA

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ABSTRACT: Because of its probable role as a Pleistocene refuge, and its range in altitude, the 321 km² Impenetrable Forest has one of the richest floras and faunas in Africa. Results of an ecological survey conducted between January 1983 and September 1984 show that elephants in this forest number fewer than 30, poaching being a primary cause for this low number. Elephants use only about 19% of the Forest area and then mostly within areas of low human activity. Assessments of the status of elephants in other forests in Uganda, and research on the role of elephants in these forests, are urgently needed so that appropriate management programs can be undertaken.

Uganda's population of elephants (Loxodonta africana africana) declined from more than 30,000 in 1973 to fewer than 2,000 in 1980 (Edroma, 1980). This loss is attributed to poaching and illegal human encroachment onto national parks and reserves (Malpas, 1981). Since 1980, the poaching of elephants in the national parks has been brought under control and these populations are now increasing. While elephant numbers in Uganda's national parks have been assessed, no surveys have been conducted in the forest reserves since the 1960's. This note describes the status and distribution of elephants in the Impenetrable (Bwindi) Forest (321 km²) of southwest Uganda (0°53'S to 1°8'S; 29°34'E to 29°50'E).

Today only about 3% (5,000 km²) of Uganda's land surface remains covered with tropical moist forest. An estimated 50% of the Nation's tropical moist forest has been felled by farmers (Butynski, 1984). Of the forest blocks which remain the Impenetrable Central Forest Reserve and Animal Sanctuary is one of the most important. This forest is by far the largest tract of natural forest in the region. There is nearly complete deforestation of areas surrounding this Reserve. Because of its considerable altitudinal range (1,160-2,600 m above sea level), and its probable role as a Pleistocene refuge (Hamilton, 1982), the Impenetrable Forest has one of the richest faunas in Africa (Butynski, 1984). The forest's population of about 115 mountain gorillas, Gorilla gorilla beringei (Harcourt, 1981), is approximately one-third of the world's population of this subspecies.

I conducted an ecological survey of the Impenetrable Forest between January 1983 and September 1984. The forest was mapped into 323 one-kilometer

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square blocks. All blocks entered for more than 0.5 km were considered to have been surveyed. A total of 128 blocks were surveyed within the Reserve and 45 blocks outside the Reserve in or near forest patches. All evidence of elephants was noted.

According to local people, elephants were present throughout the Impenetrable until about 30 years ago. Today, elephants use only approximately 61 km² (19%) of the Reserve. Their present range lies in the southwest corner of the forest and encompasses the highest elevations. Elephants showed considerable preference for areas away from the fringe of the Reserve and for areas of low human activity (Butynski, 1984). There were no reports of recent damage to crops by elephants and no evidence that elephants foraged outside the boundaries of the Reserve. Nor do migration corridors exist across the densely inhabited agricultural lands which lie between the forest and the nearest populations of elephants more than 20 km away. The elephant population was estimated to be less than 30, poaching being the primary cause of the low numbers and the elephants' limited distribution.

Elephants are known to have important effects on the vegetation and presumably on the fauna of western Uganda forests (Laws et al., 1970). This raises numerous conservation and management questions concerning interactions between elephants and endangered animals such as the mountain gorillas. The conservation status of the Impenetrable Forest should be up-graded to that of a national park to help ensure the long-term protection of the present high conservation values of this unique area. There are about ten other major relic forest blocks in Uganda in which the status of the elephant remains unknown. Assessments of the status of elephants and the other large mammals in these forests are crucial to management and, thus, urgently needed.

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