

THE GREATER MIGRATION

It's time to update your bucket list, says Sue Watt



MARCUS WESTBERG / AFRICAN PARKS

You herd it here. Tiang traverse the Boma and Badingilo National Parks in South Sudan

It's a fact. The world's largest land mammal migration occurs not, as long believed, in the Serengeti ecosystem, famed for around two million wildebeest and zebras roaming the savannah, but in the little-known Boma and Badingilo National Parks in South Sudan.

A recent aerial survey revealed a staggering annual migration of some six million antelope, among them white-eared kob, Mongalla gazelle, tiang and Bohor reedbuck, all traversing the Boma Badingilo Jonglei Landscape (BBJL) and neighbouring Gambella National Park in Ethiopia.

Both South Sudanese reserves are co-managed by renowned non-profit African Parks. Their conservation director and survey expert Mike Fay said: "I have been doing conservation in Africa for 45 years, and seeing these animals at such scale is something I could never have fathomed still existed. From the air, it felt like I was watching what Earth might have been like millennia ago, when nature and man existed together in balance."

So how do they count this bewildering array of animals across a habitat spanning 122,774 square kilometres?

Over 18 days, two planes equipped with cameras captured more than 330,000 images. Of these, nearly 60,000 taken across 64 transects showed wildlife and were painstakingly analysed using specialised software.

The survey revealed that while white-eared kob numbers increased to just over five million and other antelope populations remained stable or decreased, there was a deeply concerning decline in many non-migratory species including elephant, cheetah, hippo and buffalo.

South Sudan's government is committed to transforming the wildlife sector into a sustainable tourism industry. But protecting this vital ecosystem has its challenges, particularly regarding local communities who often face conflict and for whom the migration provides critical food security.

"Working with communities will help perpetuate this global phenomenon whilst also bringing about stability, safety and security and creating a sustainable future for the people who live here, many still recovering after years of war and disruption," Peter Fearnhead, African Parks' CEO, explained.

Fay believes that "the future potential for tourism is immense." But how easy is it for today's travellers to visit?

Self-drive isn't currently possible due to the dearth of road access and tourism infrastructure. Costly bespoke trips can be arranged, with access inevitably by helicopter, but African Parks is planning on facilitating more conventional tourism as a priority in the next year.

"We are already seeing an increase in inquiries into tourism opportunities and viewing the migration," Fay said. "Having the world's largest land mammal migration could put South Sudan on the map as a must-visit eco-tourism destination."