

Why Uganda's Bushfires Aren't All Bad

EVENTS

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Fire Season

For two weeks in February 2015 we moved through northern Uganda to assess the primate community at multiple sites. This is the middle of the dry season with the rains not expected until March. During the dry months, large, raging, bushfires are common in Uganda. On several occasions we drive towards curtains of smoke and bushfires.

Tall grasses and bushes are ablaze, but also trees and fence posts. Many of the fires are wind-driven and move quickly. Much of northern Uganda has already burnt—and much more will burn before the March rains. Throughout this survey, hazy skies (the result of thick smoke and dust), create a spooky atmosphere during the day and spectacular sunsets and sunrises.

Sunrise is hazy after extensive bushfires at Opit Central Forest Reserve, north Uganda. (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski)



A bushfire turns plant life to clouds of smoke near Zoka Central Forest Reserve, north Uganda. (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski)



The sun rises through the smoky haze of a bushfire at Opit Central Forest Reserve, north Uganda. (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski)

Fire for More Than Just Cooking

In northern Uganda, as over much of Africa, farmers and hunters use fire as a tool to exploit and maintain grasslands and woodlands. Fire, at least temporarily, removes much of the dense bush and 2-3-meter tall rank grass that covers most of northern Uganda. This greatly facilitates the preparation of the soil for planting crops, promotes the flush of green grasses for livestock, attracts wildlife, greatly improves visibility for hunters, and makes movement through the area by people, livestock, and wildlife much easier.



Many of the plants of north Uganda are fire-dependent and only come forth and flower after a burn. (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski)



One such fire-dependent species is *Cochlospermum tinctorium*, the flowers of which are shown in the above two photographs. (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski)

As depressing as it is to witness so much vegetation go up in smoke, there is one up-side for us. The fires attract an abundance of birds of prey, eager for a feast.

Birds on the Lookout

This creates the perfect opportunity for us to document the diversity of raptors at those sites where we encounter bushfires. Perched on tall trees and electricity poles on the edges of these fires, dozens of raptors of several species scan the ground for insects, lizards, snakes, small mammals, and other animals escaping from the smoke and heat. Other raptors soar and hover about—waiting! We find ourselves in an avian action movie, with our cameras clicking away to capture the drama. We'll say more about this in an upcoming blog about Beaudouin's snake-eagle and other raptors in northern Uganda.



We stop to scan for birds and primates south of Adjumani, north Uganda. (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski)



A fine example of the vulnerable Beaudouin's snake-eagle (*Circaetus beaudouini*) watches from its perch near Kilak, north Uganda. (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski)



Bushland regenerates after a bushfire in Otzi East Central Forest Reserve, north Uganda. Senegal lesser galagos (*Galago senegalensis senegalensis*) are common at this site. See blog: [“Primate Survey Raises Question: Are Uganda’s Northernmost Chimpanzees Vanishing?”](#) (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski)



A white stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) forages along a fence on the edge of a bushfire near Kilak, north Uganda. (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski)

Unfortunately, many, if not most, bushfires “go wild,” spreading into and greatly damaging precious riverine and gallery forests. Forest now covers but a small proportion of northern Uganda as a result of fire and clearance for agriculture. It is in these forests where much of northern Uganda’s biodiversity occurs, along with most of the region’s threatened species of plants and animals.



Degraded woodland rests after a bushfire near Zoka Central Forest Reserve, north Uganda. (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong and Tom Butynski)



Uncontrolled bushfire approaches (and would later enter) Otzi East Central Forest Reserve, north Uganda. (Photograph by Yvonne de Jong & Tom Butynski)

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MEET THE AUTHOR

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Yvonne A. de Jong (PhD) is a Kenya-based Dutch primatologist who has worked in Africa for more than 13 years. She is member of the Nocturnal Primate Research Group at Oxford Brookes University, member of various IUCN/SSC Specialist Groups including the Primate and Wild Pig Specialist Groups, and Collaborating Scientist of the Institute of Primate Research in Nairobi. Her main research focus is the biogeography, diversity and conservation of eastern Africa's primates and several other groups of large mammals, including the warthogs. She is the co-leader of the Eastern Africa Primate Diversity and Conservation Program and senior ecologist at the Lolldaiga Hills Research Programme)Sustainability Centre Eastern Africa' based in Laikipia, Kenya. Thomas M. Butynski (PhD) is an American conservationist and ecologist who has worked in Africa for 45 years, mostly in Botswana, Kenya, Uganda, and Equatorial Guinea. He is a member of four IUCN/SSC Specialist Groups (Primates, Antelopes, Afrotheria, Wild Pigs) and has served as Director of the Institute of Tropical Forest Conservation in Uganda, Director of Conservation International's Eastern Africa Biodiversity Hotspots Program in Kenya, Director of the King Khalid Wildlife Research Center in Saudi Arabia, Vice-Chair of the Africa Section of the IUCN/SSC Primate Specialist Group, Senior Editor of the journal African Primates, and a Senior Editor for Mammals of Africa. At present he is Co-leader of the Eastern Africa Primate Diversity and Conservation Program, and Director of Research at the Sustainability Centre Eastern Africa in Kenya.



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