

# HUNTER'S ★HORN



Rothschild Giraffes  
along the Nile.

# GIRAFFE CONSERVATION

BY LEWIS METZGER



## THE PROJECT

My life — and that of my family — was changed forever after a chance encounter at the 2017 Safari Club International conference in Las Vegas, where world-renowned conservationist and anti-poaching leader Ivan Carter was the speaker. He talked about the many conservation efforts he was working on in Africa; one specific project he was focusing on needed funding: the Operation Twiga II (Twiga is the Swahili word for giraffe). This was a unique conservation effort to relocate some of the world's rarest giraffes, the Rothschild Giraffe. This three-week conservation effort, in collaboration with the Ivan Carter Wildlife Conservation Alliance, the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) and the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), entailed transporting the giraffes across the Nile River and releasing them to be monitored and guarded —away from potential threats to their existence. Veterinarian physicians and biologists from the United States, Namibia, Australia and Uganda, and nearly 50 Uganda Game Scouts were part of this effort to save the increasingly endangered giraffes.

As a Life Member of the Houston Safari Club, I have always supported conservation efforts. However, I had no particular ties to giraffes or Uganda or The Murchison Falls National Park. But something just clicked and I felt the need get involved. I knew that my involvement needed to be more than simply writing a check. I felt compelled to step in and get fully engaged to help with the effort to save these amazing creatures.

As a financial advisor, I help many clients create charitable giving plans that usually focused on causes that they are passionate about and want to financially support. I was about to put such a plan in place for my family. It was a project I wanted to support. I thought this was a project that I could have a significant impact on with my efforts.

I sought out Ivan after his presentation to

learn more about the goals of this conservation project and the financial requirements to help achieve those goals. After a brief discussion, I made a commitment to Ivan to help with this incredible effort. But, I did have one question for him. I knew I was going to make a commitment to help. I knew I was going to Uganda to aid in and see this effort up close and first-hand. However, I had to ask, “can my family come?” I wanted to share this experience with them. I wanted them to see this wonderful creature and the amazing beauty of Murchison Falls National Park. Ivan was quick to say, “yes, please bring the family.” The commitment was made. In August of this year, we boarded a plane in Houston bound for Uganda to participate in this momentous conservation effort to relocate the Rothschild Giraffe to their new home in the park.

With the vision and cooperation of Ivan and Julian Fennessy, Ph.D. of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation, we set out to bring these giraffes back from the brink of extinction. One need only look at a map of Uganda to see that the Nile River splits the park, leaving these giraffes on one side of the river. As giraffes do not swim, there was no way for them to cross the river without human intervention. Getting them from one side of the Nile to the other was a task in and of itself. The move would require the giraffes be darted with a tranquilizing drug, captured, given an antidote, administered antibiotic shots, attached with GPS tracking devices, loaded on a trailer and then transported across the river on a barge.

## THE JOURNEY

Our journey from Houston to Africa was a lengthy one. After multiple plane rides, we arrived two days later at the Murchison Falls National Park. We were met by quite a crew – Ivan, Julian and his team, the well-known and celebrated wildlife veterinarian Dr. Peter Morkel from Namibia, veterinarians from several U.S. zoos, the Uganda

Wildlife Authority officials and nearly 50 park game scouts. (The game scouts are the equivalent to the park rangers we find in our national parks in the United States.) The turnout of leading veterinarians, knowledgeable game scouts and the presence of the Director and Assistant Director of the Uganda Wildlife Authority indicated how vital this conservation effort was to the survival of these giraffes and the species in general. Furthermore, the turn out showed how dedicated all of these individuals were to saving and protecting these animals.

The actual relocation project would be a three-week long process. My family and I participated for eight days; I wish we could have been there for the entire process as this was one of the most memorable and unique experiences we have ever had in our lives. I must admit it was in no way a luxury vacation. It was a far cry from the romanticized and often heard of tales associated with fancy five-star African photo safaris. We stayed at a simple motel with no air conditioning. The dinner meals were served cafeteria style and the menu never changed. Yes, we had the same menu eight nights in a row! What we did experience was something few will ever have the opportunity to do. As the Murchison Falls National Park is open to the public, we had unlimited open access to the entire park. This is a privilege not available to the general public. Our experience was up close and personal. It was truly first-hand. We actually participated in capturing, loading and unloading of these beautiful creatures.

Most animals, when darted with a sedative, will run for a few minutes then lay down. The giraffe, however, sleeps standing up. Under sedation, this means they run the risk of possibly shutting down their circulatory system. To prevent the onset of death, after each giraffe was darted with a tranquilizer we used long ropes to tackle them to the ground. We would jump on the animal to hold them down while the

Transporting the Rothschild giraffes across the Nile to their new home in the southern part of the Murchison Falls National Park.



Ivan Carter, the Director of the Uganda Wildlife Authority, and Lewis Metzger.

veterinary physician injected them with the stimulant antidote, antibiotics, took blood samples, x-rays, measurements, photographs and attached blindfolds. They also administered medication to treat each animal for giraffe skin disease and snare injuries. As a part of the relocation process, the biologists attached a select number of the animals with GPS satellite tracking devices. This would allow the biologists to monitor and study the movements and behavior of the giraffes in their new home.

Now the challenge: how do you get a fully grown, 15-foot tall, 1,500-pound, blindfolded, wild animal onto a specially designed trailer? It was like leading a wild stallion. Once on the trailer, we would move the animal to a holding pen called a boma. In the boma, their blindfolds were removed and they would be monitored for a couple of days before the journey across the river. This allowed the animal to calm down and to ensure that each and every one of them was healthy and fit for the remainder of the trip across the Nile.

Following this day or two of recovery and monitoring, three or four giraffes were loaded on a larger trailer for the three-hour journey across the savannah grasslands to the river. Once at the river, the larger trailer would drive onto the barge ferry for the ride across the Nile. Then, another one-hour drive into the park, where they would be released into their new home.

Throughout our experience relocating the giraffes, we encountered a handful of minor glitches that are not easily fixed when one is such a remote location. This included multiple breakdowns of the specially designed giraffe trailer and tractor. Another day, the barge ferry actually ran out of diesel fuel halfway across the river. Remember, we were working as volunteers in a Third World country. To say the least, all of this slowed us down but did not stop the effort. The determination and dedication of everyone involved, from the professionals to the volunteers, kept the effort moving forward. During our down times, we took the opportunity to appreciate the remoteness and beauty of where we were. The downtime gave us the opportunity to watch and observe the hundreds and hundreds of wild animals and birds in the park.

### THE IMPACT

After the three-week conservation effort, 19 Rothschild giraffes were successfully relocated in Uganda's Murchison Falls



Group of volunteers, veterinarians, game scouts and members of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation and the Uganda Wildlife Authority.

National Park. It seems like a small number to most people. But when you consider the number of Rothschild's giraffes left in the wild, this was a significant undertaking to ensure the continued safety of an almost extinct species of animal.

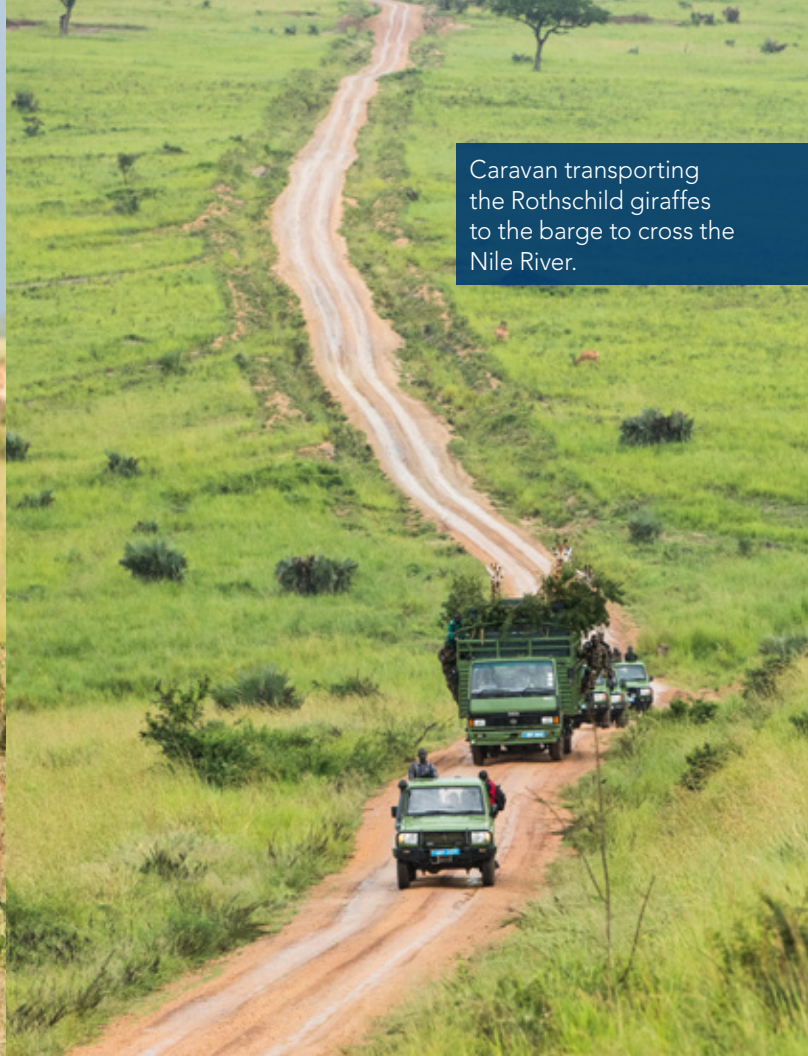
Rarely when you donate money to charity do you get to see the benefit of your donation. This was a chance to have a personal and hands-on experience. It was tremendously rewarding for all of us. Having my children on this journey in Uganda was a

reminder of the importance of the long-term impact of charitable giving. As a parent, you always think about the future. You ask yourself, am I doing what I can to make a difference for future generations? I know that through our work with Ivan, Julian, the other zoo volunteers and paid staff associated with the project, we are giving these giraffes a fighting chance for a sustainable future. We are creating an opportunity for future generations to enjoy and appreciate the Rothschild Giraffe. ★

(L-R) Peggy Metzger, Lewis Metzger, Michelle Metzger, Austin Stewart and Austin Metzger in Murchison Falls National Park.



Caravan transporting the Rothschild giraffes to the barge to cross the Nile River.



Transporting a giraffe.



## THE ROTHSCHILD GIRAFFE

The Rothschild Giraffe is named for Lord Walter Rothschild, of the famous Rothschild's. Lord Rothschild was a zoologist and he first saw the giraffe that would become his namesake when he was on a trek in Eastern Africa. The Rothschild Giraffe is also known as the Ugandan giraffe or Nubian Giraffe. The Rothschild is unique in that it is one of the tallest species of giraffe and can grow to be 19 feet. They can weigh more than a ton. You may not know it, and it may not appear to be so, but the giraffe is related to the deer family. Something unique about giraffes is that their patterns (spots) are unique. No two animals are alike. Another unique feature about the giraffe is that sleeps while it is standing. Often times people mistakenly believe that giraffes have horns. However, they do not. The two shapes on the top of their head are actually cartilage called ossicone.

## THE CAUSE

Over the last 30 years, the giraffe populations across Africa have been declining. By some estimation, the population has decreased by 40 percent. During this time, the population has dramatically shrunk from over 155,000 in 1987 to approximately 97,000 today. The Rothschild Giraffe is among the most vulnerable subspecies with an estimated 3,000 remaining in the wild—75 percent of which are represented at Murchison Falls National Park.

Currently listed as 'Endangered' on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List, these giraffe populations are at risk of further decline, and a rapid decline at that. The main threats to the giraffe are: human disturbance, some mining, habitat loss, as well as habitat destruction and fragmentation. The worst threat to the giraffe population is the despicable practice of poaching. Unfortunately, illegal poaching of giraffes in Africa is increasing and there seems to be no end to it in sight.

## MURCHISON FALLS NATIONAL PARK

Murchison Falls National Park was established in 1952. At 1,500 square miles. It is the largest national park in Uganda. Uganda is in the central and eastern part of the African continent. If you have been to the park, you will know how beautiful, awesome and inspiring it can be with the large variety of plant life in the forests, the Nile River region, Lake Albert, and the diversity of animals. The park is well known to be an habitat for over 75 mammal species and over 450 different bird species. The variety of animals in the park include elephants, chimpanzees, Uganda kob antelope, waterbuck, hartebeests, oribis, Nile crocodiles, cape buffalo and the venerable and fearsome leopard and lions. As a side note, and for those old enough to remember, one of Humphrey Bogart's most famous movies, "The African Queen" with Katharine Hepburn was filmed in the park.

# GIRAFFE

Lewis Metzger in the Murchison Falls National Park.





Three of the 19 Rothschild giraffes who were relocated to the south part of the Murchison Falls National Park.

Murchison Falls National Park night sky overlooking old hotel ruins.

