

ONE JOURNEY OF SEVEN BILLION: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MR. BOB. –MARCH 2022

GHANA 1970-72



I remember best the times when we were camped by rivers that had no names; and the moon would rise into the West African night, and I would hear a distant leopard cough, above the song of the African night; the insect sounds and the night birds; and I would sit quietly by my tent, and wonder at the stars, this place and fate. Around the fire, close by, the camp was filled with the chatter of my crew, in Dagbani, Wala and Twi. Then Kwame would call and we would gather for dinner; a dozen hands sharing Ghana chop from a single pot and we would laugh at the events of the day; two jackals humping, a cape buffalo snorting in the river thickets, shaking his head at us; about to charge and then... Our chatter would stop. From across the river, a lion's roar would reverberate through the dense African night, and the night insects would suddenly stop their endless song. And for a moment it would be still. It would be utterly quiet, but only for a moment. Then the laughter and jabbering would begin again, followed soon by the insect song and the strange calls of the night birds that call in the African night.

“Ah! Mr. Bob, the lion is coming to chop us!”

“Ah, this be a Ghana lion, M’damfo.... He no chop Canada meat! He be looking for good Ghana man for dinner!”

And our laughter would dance off into the savannah, for the lion to hear, so perhaps he too could listen and contemplate the complexity of existence.

It was then, by some distant river, that I was truly content. Young and foolish and lost, somewhere on the endless steppes of West Africa; but content. I was having the time of my life. On the Kaulpaw River, in as wild a place as Africa offers.



Kaulpaw River 1971. The crew getting cleaned up. And taking a chance on getting their jewels chopped off by a croc....

HOW?

In the winter of 69 when I was skiing and living in my old truck, I stopped in Vancouver to see some friends and ended up in the biology department at the University of B.C. At the entrance to the department, on the bulletin board, was a small note that said, “Do you want to go to Africa?” Hah. I looked up Dave King. He had taught at Mweka College of Wildlife Management in Tanzania. They were looking for CUSO volunteers to teach there. That single little note changed my life. I went through the process and I was to go to Mweka. At the last minute they phoned me and asked if I would like a field job in West Africa. Hah, again.

We flew from Ottawa straight to Lagos, Nigeria, an entire plane full of CUSO volunteers. It was a pretty good party. I woke up just as the plane crossed the African coast. I remember going to the pilot's cabin (we could do that in those days) and watching the sun strike the African continent below us. We flew on, over the clouds, and across northern Ghana. I looked down through a small hole in the clouds. I could see a brown river, a set of mud huts and a tiny village. I remember how red the soil was. I also remember thinking... Now what exactly have I got myself into....



It was a special time, postcolonial Ghana. The north especially was still wild, and African. I loved it. Or most of it; the people, the wildlife, the wonderful people I worked with. And then there was the stuff one tends to forget in time; malaria and dysentery, long hot lonely African nights. And the red dust. Always the red dust...

After a couple of days in Accra, the capital city, I was taken down the Game Department headquarters where I met Dr. Emmanuel Asibey, head of the department. We would have many adventures together. He showed me a new land rover and introduced me to Kwame Baffoe, my driver. Nominally he was to drive the rover; in reality he was to become my guide as I came to understand Ghanaian society and the Ghana way..., my nurse when I was sick, and one of my best friends in this world. A day later we headed up country. Two days of hard driving and we arrived at Tamale, in the north. I was humid and wet, the middle of the wet season. We stayed in a little motel on the edge of town. As I slipped into sleep I could hear drums.



Department HQ in Accra, Dr. Emmanuel Asibey, my boss and mentor.

The next day we headed to Mole Game Reserve. It was two days of travel, over miles and miles of dusty red roads to the very edge the known world. It was lovely. My home was a few hundred yards from the edge of the scarp, looking down onto a water hole and across miles and miles of steaming African savannah. It was not the time to go to the bush, in the middle of the wet season, but I wanted to get out into it. I got Kwame and we drove up the Kananto road, a narrow track through tall Guinea grass eight feet tall. As we turned a corner I saw a dark streak cross the road ahead of us. I yelled at Kwame to stop. I jumped out into steaming buffalo tracks. I turned to follow them into the tall grass, Kwame calling to me, in a plaintive voice....

“Mr. Bob, this is not a good idea.....”

I had no rifle. The grass was thick, eight feet tall, the grass stems a quarter inch in diameter, close spaced. I weaved between the stems, moving about 50 feet when I came out of the tall grass into an area the size of a small back yard, where the grass was mowed down to 6 inches, green and fresh. Everywhere there we steaming piles of buffalo manure. I looked into the tall grass across the little meadow. It seemed dark in places amid the grass. I looked also to the left and then the right, it also seemed dark. Then I saw eyes and then horns and the bulk of Cape Buffalo. A tsetse fly hit me in the face. I swatted it and the entire area erupted. I had walked into the middle of a herd of buffalo, 100 strong. They were all around me. They roared off into the deeper grass and left me

standing there in their scent and the sounds of their pounding hooves. Behind me this small voice said, “Mr. Bob?”



The view from near my home at Mole NP.



The headquarters and the motel, above the ponds along the Mole River.

Africa was like a dream for me, doing what I had only dreamt of doing, tossed by chance into a role and experience that was unique, scary and intense in every moment. For two years. Mole Park headquarters and the motel are a very special place. They are built on a scarp that sits 200 feet above the floodplain of the Mole River, with a view of the meadows and ponds along the river and the endless miles of savannah off to the west. Mole was originally a game reserve set up in colonial times. The motel was built by a classic old colonial character who was locally famous for his eccentricities. He was gone when I was there but the staff always laughed when his name was mentioned. Apparently he was a piece of work.

But the park system and the department were really built by Ghanaians, after independence. When Emmanuel came back to Ghana, after school in Aberdeen, the Department consisted of about 100 people at 4 different game reserves. He took on the task of creating a national park system for Ghana. As part of that, he and I put together a group to travel around the country and do wildlife surveys in areas we thought might be candidates for national park status. We called the crew the “Faunal Survey Team”. Our first task was to do a survey of wildlife numbers in the area close to park HQ. There was a rough square of land to the west of the headquarters bounded by the Sawla road, the Kananto to Lovi road, in the park, and the Mole to Lovi road. We established a grid of lines 1 km apart, west to east across the landscape. We would go out each morning and walk these lines across the area (about 15 km) recording the landscape features, the vegetation and the wildlife we saw. This was in a time before there we any kind of useful maps. No Google Earth, no GPS, just old colonial era topographic maps. It was tough,

working through the tall wet season grass, often wading in water up to our waists for 2-3 km in the low areas, tsetse flies swarming around our heads like fighter aircraft.

I ran a group called the Faunal Survey Team. We did wildlife surveys all over the country, looking for sites for national parks and wildlife reserves. We worked all over the country. An overview of all the places we went is included in the [final report](#).

We began our training and the development of survey techniques at Mole National Park. It was in the middle of the wet season. Anyone who bitches about mosquitos needs to spend 10 minutes in the wet season in northern Ghana, in the land of the tsetse fly. You will never bitch again.

With the work we did that wet season we developed a system for documenting wildlife numbers and distribution that we applied at Mole, to design new game viewing roads, and across the country to identify areas for new National Parks and game reserves.

Life was perfect, on \$129.32 per month.

Our team was made up of Ofori Fringpong, who would go on to become head of the Department years later, Ahmed Nuhu, a Wala who would become a chief later in life, Sylvester Azika, a Fra Fra from Naverongo in the north, a perfect gentleman and one of conservation's unsung heroes, Kwame, the driver for our Land Rover, Lutie and Luivie Kanton, Sissala, from Tumu, game scouts. Luivie would become the senior chief of the Sissala, many years later, the Tumu Kuro.

[Pictures of these folks, and others, are here.](#)

As the dry season approached (November) we headed south to the rain forest to a place called Sefwi Wiaso. Our time there was special. We set up our tents on the edge of a village called Adjofea. There I would learn the Ghana way.

Our first major project was in the south west of the country, in the rain forest, which in those days still extended beyond the horizon to the west, as we looked down onto it from our camp on the ridges of the Krokasua Hills. We were charged with finding a potential site for a rain forest national Park and with trying to find a way to deal with elephants raising small farms in the area. We later camped on the edge of a village called Adjofea. Over our time there we became part of village life. That story is told in pictures in [Adjofea \(Sefwi\)](#). A story I wrote years later about those times is included in that file. It was called Ensonokrom, or elephant town. The arguments I made in that story have stood the test of time, but they were not politically correct then, and are even less so today.



In traditional dress, in Adjofoea, 1970.



Luivie with a head load, heading into the upper Tawya River, 1970.

We returned to Mole Park in the north in the dry season. We did wildlife surveys there to document wildlife numbers in the park and to help design wildlife viewing roads and

trails. We logged hundreds of kilometers of surveys, walking 10-15 km each morning, in pairs, one with a notebook; the other with a rifle. Our team did over 7000 km of surveys in two years. We used those surveys to design game viewing trails and to document the total weight of all the animals there, called biomass. The numbers we found we astonishing.



At the end of the dry, we went south again in a park reserve called Digya, on the edge of the massive Volta reservoir. It was a tough time. Years later, Ahmed and I would get together and we would mention “Digya” and we would both shake our heads. Photos of that area and our final report on the area are [here](#).



Ahmed and I and boat crew person, 1972.



Digya arm of the Volta reservoir.

From Didya we went to the Gambaga Scarp in the Upper East region.

On the long trek north we stopped for the night in a government “Rest House”, somewhere south of the scarp. In the colonial days the British built rest houses for colonial officers a day’s walk apart throughout the country. This one was well off the beaten path. We pulled into the yard. It was obvious that it hadn’t been used in years. The care taker came out and went mildly crazy. We were the first people to use the house for years. Kwame and the care taker went off the nearest village for food, I and others settled in. I pounded the dust off of the mattress in one of the rooms and lay down to rest. There was a fan on the ceiling. Suddenly it started to move, bathing me in lovely cool air. Wonderful. Then I realized I could not hear a generator, and we were 200 miles from any power line. I went out to investigate. In a small room behind the kitchen I found the care takers son on a bicycle, hooked to a massive stone fly wheel, and a series of cables that lead to the fan in my room. He was, of course, pouring sweat. He didn’t speak any English and we used sign language to communicate. He ran the bike for a while, cooling me, than I got on the bike and sent him to the bedroom to enjoy the cool moving air. Welcome to postcolonial Ghana.



Gambaga Scarp and the Red Volta, circa 1971.



Traditional art work in the north (move over Picasso...)

From Gambaga we went back to Mole and then, a few weeks later, south to Bui. The Black Volta drains much of northern Ghana and neighboring countries. A Bui it flows through a low mountain range. It is a dam builder's wet dream. Years before the Russians had started to build a dam there, where we camped there were acres of old equipment, meant to be used in the dam, but just rusting now. We established a national park there, but the dam was finally built many years later in the 2000s. But that is a long story. It was unique and very lovely at sunset, the last sun on the hills and river, the birds of West Africa providing a lullaby.



Black Volta and the Bui Hills, 1971.

And then there was [Boebeng-Fiema](#). A very special place. The oldest game reserve in Africa. Another long story.





Collecting palm wine. (Pat Morrow photo).

All of this is just scratching the surface of my time there. I could tell a thousand stories about the land, the wildlife; the people I met. For now, this will have to do. Perhaps in the future I will try to write up those stories and add them here.