

# *Strange Sounding Names, Far Away Places*

An account of an exploratory expedition  
to Malka Mari

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*All photos by the author.*



Fig. 1: Malka Mari in the distance

**M**alka Mari, Barisa, Malka Lorne, all Boran names. On an earlier safari to the Malka Mari National Park, I was intrigued to hear all the place names were of Boran origin; whilst I was in the heart of Dogadia country, a wild camel

keeping Somali clan which is possibly one of the largest clans in Kenya stretching through to Somalia and Ethiopia. On discussing the issue of place names with local Dogadia and Garreh elders, they with one voice all decided that it was Boran country previ-



Fig. 2: Typical type locality

ously but the Somalis and the Garreh<sup>1</sup> had driven them south leaving their names behind.

Malka Mari National Park is simply an area drawn on the map where Kenya has a bulge of territory into Ethiopia occasioned by the River Dawa being the boundary. It is a National Park by name but has no demarcated boundaries nor any facilities. The nearest Park official will be found in the District Headquarters of Mandera as the District Kenya Wildlife Service Warden (120 kilometres to the East).

For years the sound of the name Malka Mari attracted me, but I knew full well it was in a military operational area and exceedingly difficult for a civilian to get there. I had made one attempt the previous year to befriend a senior Army officer in the hope I could simply fly to Mandera and visit my friend. Plans were set (aviation fuel arranged and even an aircraft clearance granted for me to fly into the North Eastern province of Kenya) when a frantic signal came through our local Police station that my new found military friend had been moved back to barracks in Nairobi with his entire Company. Undaunted I wrote a proposal to the Senior Research Officer in the Kenya Wildlife Service suggesting it was high time the flora and fauna of the "Malka Mari National Park was monitored". The proposal was accepted and it was not long before I was communicating with the District Kenya Wildlife Service warden based in Mandera.

Further arrangements were made and the isolated Game Warden was clearly overwhelmed at the pros-

pect of a flight over his "National Park". On the appointed day, I flew alone with all my plant presses and spirit bottles to Mandera, having previously arranged aviation fuel to be delivered by an Arab trader's truck.

The District Game Warden was a delightful fellow, full of enthusiasm and clearly a true conservationist, but completely handicapped by lack of fuel and an evident threat of security to visit his "National Park". Some 100 kilometres north west up the Dawa River. We called on the various officials in Mandera to emphasize my official mission to monitor the Park and left to undertake the first part of the exercise, an aerial survey.

Flying up the river, and over some of the most dramatically broken country I had ever seen, I was totally captured by the deep gorges, wide sand lug-gas, dense bush and rocky outcrops which are all so rewarding for any botanical exploration. As far as wildlife was concerned, this area was clearly the centre of all the Somali camels of the region. Park or no park, camels were threading their way to and from the River Dawa in their thousands. There were no borders demarcated. Even the Ethiopian border leaving the River Dawa to the west of an old British fort was not discernable. After some 60 minutes of flying, it was apparent that my Game Warden companion was extremely uncomfortable with my constant manoeuvring, looking for signs of wildlife in amongst the livestock. I realized a landing was essential and without delay. A small town called Rhamu mercifully provided a disused airstrip where we landed abruptly, my companion falling out of the aircraft greatly relieved to be on firm ground.

Hardly before the engine was turned off, we were completely surrounded by hordes of children. For certain there was not a fertility problem in this little town. I was completely trapped by the dense crowd of excited children, when a slim fine featured young man forced his way through a sea of giggling and chattering juveniles, thrust out his hand and said "I'm Jack". Jack was sent by the Gods. It turned out he was ready to drive me where ever I desired. By now the Warden had recovered and agreed we should survey the Park from the ground.

Jack assembled his kit and co-driver known as M.O.D, "Ministry of Defence", loaded with petrol and we were off to Malka Mari. So began the first of 3 expeditions to this remarkable region.

Progress was slow, as quite correctly, the Mandera Game Warden who had never visited the area wished to visit all the Chiefs and elders along the way as we proceeded up a rough but used track.

<sup>1</sup> Garreh – A Boran speaking Somali clan occupying Mandera and Elwack in all three territories – Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia.



Fig. 3: Sansevierias in situ, probably *Sansevieria intermedia* (= *volkensii*)

According to my maps, we entered the “Park” at 5.00 p.m. and camped in a lugga called Lak baborgebiss which translated meant the “Valley of broken vehicles”. The succulent plants were just extraordinary from *Cyphostemma betiformis*, *Monadenium reflexum*, *Pyrenacantha malvifolia* and undescribed species of *Aloe* and *Echidnopsis*.

A long walk up the lugga of the broken vehicles revealed further exciting finds, including an aloe which was totally unfamiliar to me.

The next day, now accompanied by the local Chief, we left Jack’s Land Rover at an old 1945 military Fort, now in ruins. This was at the head of a path descending to the Dawa River, which at this point flowed through a massive gorge some 2,000 feet below. The descent revealed further exciting plants. A *Monadenium* which is clearly undescribed resembling *Monadenium ellenbeckii* but quite different. Finally, after a 2 hour steep descent we arrived at Malka Mari. Malka is the Boran term for a crossing in a permanent river, Mari meaning a place where different people meet. The opposite bank was, at this point, in Ethiopian territory.

After a second night camped near the old Fort and partaking in a feast of goat meat provided by the Chief, I had to return to Rhamu. I was elated having made firm friends with Jack and his family, the Chiefs and Inspector, the Game Warden and elders

and promised to return for a more thorough inspection of this fascinating area.

Malka Mari was not revisited until January 2001. I was accompanied by Len Newton and an old friend who had recently lost a wonderful wife in her late 30’s to cancer, who had come as a healing process.

After landing at Rhamu, we experienced the same crowd of children completely surrounding the aircraft and Jack, forcing his way through the crowds to greet us. There was no delay on this occasion, and we set off with the indomitable M.O.D. and Jack at the wheel. Progress was extremely slow, with my companions requesting a halt every few miles.

We finally arrived at the “lugga of the broken vehicle” and moved up stream as our old camp site was now occupied by a large herd of goats. The area was thoroughly explored and I was delighted that Len confirmed that the most attractive Aloe seen on the previous trip was in fact new to science and he subsequently named it *Aloe carolina* in memory of Charlie Wheeler’s very special wife. The local Somalis use the sap as anti eye infection and it is called Daharr Indot (Eye Aloe).

On the following day after very slow progress, we arrived at the tiny village of Malka Mari which had been established not far from the old Fort. There was considerable tension in the air as the Ethiopian Army was massed on the opposite bank of the River Dawa. They were attempting to separate two



Figs. 4 & 5: Close up pictures of the unidentified sansevieria.

sub clans of the Dogodia who had been fighting over some blood money. The Chief made a special request that we should not descend into the Dawa Gorge as the sight of several Europeans scrambling about the bushes on the Kenya side of the border would alarm the Ethiopian Army.

We set off down a track in a southerly direction through the most delightful country. Deep red soil covered in thick *Acacia/Commiphora* bush as we drove south over undulating ridges and valleys. The depressions crowded with huge *Acacia tortilis*. Rising out of the bush were numerous tall slender ant hills, some up to 4 metres in height adding to the picturesque landscape. We kept stopping to search for interesting plants at one small lugga.

Charlie Wheeler called me to point out a most attractive sansevieria growing in deep shade on red sandy soil with three leaves 8 to 14 cm long attractively marked on lower and upper surface blue/green with a pink edge. Clearly not a common plant and its identification puzzles me to this day.

Apart from some massive stands of *S. robusta* and *S. intermedia* with small rhizome found on the summit of Dandu, clearly not the same as the normal more robust *S. intermedia* L.Newton No. 5789, no other sansevierias were seen during the entire safari. Having been thwarted at our explorations of the Dawa Gorge as it enters Kenyan territory, we decided to climb the hills of Dandu which lay some 60 kilometres due south of Rhamu. We stopped in the tiny hamlet of Dandu, the Borana word for Marabou Stork, and partook of the usual spicy tea so favoured by the Somali camel herders, then camped

under two vast *Acacia tortilis*.

We left Jack and the sturdy M.O.D. in camp and started out as it became light. There was an hour's walk to the foot of Dandu Mountain through thick *Commiphora* bush. I was delighted to find a strong population of *Commiphora alaticaulis* and collected a perfect seedling.

The country was in very good shape whilst clearly camels and goats frequent the area it was by no means over grazed. We ascended the unusual hill passing heavily weathered sand stone rock resembling an ancient Scottish castle. Fascinating country but surprisingly did not reveal anything special. Len found a *Huernia* and *Echidnopsis* but both were sterile.

The top of Dandu was flat and dotted with these curious sandstone sentinels covered with lichen and in some cases *Dorstenia* sp. protruding out of cracks in the sandstone. After a thorough unfruitful search we returned to base before dark having had a most invigorating day but not so rewarding botanically.

Thus ended the second journey to Malka Mari.

A third visit with a friend who was solely a *Commiphora* collector, confirmed the position of our unidentified sansevieria. I made further collections, the first having expired.

Should any of the readers of 'Sansevieria' be able to identify this plant from the photograph, I would be most interested to establish its identity<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: The unidentified sansevieria would seem to be Sansevieria 'Horwood' sometimes known as 'FKH 424'. This was collected in Kenya by Frank Horwood but without precise locality data. However the plant found by Gilfrid Powys is particularly attractive form.