



ZOE MULLER (4)

# sticking their necks out

Why did the giraffe cross the lake? This was no joke for eight of these towering animals in Kenya earlier this year but a very real experience – and **Zoe Muller** of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation was on hand to find out if the answer was ‘to get to the other side’.

**T**HERE WAS AN AIR OF NERVOUSNESS as the day’s first light crept slowly across the muddy waters of Lake Baringo. The only sounds were the gentle creaking of the old barge as it rocked on the lake and the deep, rhythmic breathing of an octet of giraffes as, blinking into the dawn, they became part of conservation history.

It was the early hours of 7 February 2011 and we had all gathered on the shore of Lake Baringo, one of the largest waterbodies in Kenya’s Great Rift Valley, to witness a remarkable endeavour. Today was the day when eight Rothschild’s giraffes were to be moved to their new home in the Ruko Conservancy on the far side of the lake.

*Giraffa camelopardalis rothschildi* once roamed freely across much of western Kenya and the Great Rift Valley, but decades of persecution, increased human settlement and accelerated habitat loss have had a major impact on the wild population. It is thought to now number fewer than 670 individuals, a figure that recently prompted the IUCN to upgrade the subspecies’ conservation classification to Endangered. At one time Lake Baringo was a focal point for the animals (they are also known as Baringo giraffes), but for at least 70 years they have been absent from its shores. The translocation

was thus planned as a major move towards reintroducing the subspecies into the area so that it could go on to reclaim some of its former range.

Giraffes may look laid-back, but ask them to do anything more than eat leaves and lope around the savanna and they tend to get very stressed, so we knew we had to organise the translocation with forethought and care. After four years of planning we were ready. The operation would be carried

out in stages to minimise trauma to the animals and increase our chances of success, and Soysambu Conservancy, on the shore of Lake Elmenteita, was to provide the source

ABOVE Balanced in a barge that is taking them to the Ruko Conservancy on the far shore of Lake Baringo, four Rothschild’s giraffes appear unfazed by their surroundings and the novel mode of transport.

BELOW The boma in the Ruko Conservancy is ready and waiting for its new occupants.



population. Eight fit and healthy individuals were selected for the move.

After three days of intense action the eight giraffes were captured and, a little bewildered but nonetheless safe, they were held in a boma at Soysambu for three weeks to recover before being moved 160 kilometres north to the release site. Chosen because it is inaccessible by road and thus offers a high level of security, the Ruko Conservancy lies on the shore of Lake Baringo – and the only way to get there is by boat. It is a community-operated initiative that aims to restore the region’s wildlife and biological diversity and at the same time increase tourism, which in turn should drive more conservation action. Not only will Ruko offer protected habitat for a number of species, it will also attract income for the local people, provide employment and inspire the next generation.

At the end of the calming-down period at Soysambu, we loaded the giraffes into a specially designed ‘giraffe mover’ (a very large truck) at 11 o’clock one night and drove them northward through the darkness, taking care to avoid low-slung power cables. It was a long journey on bumpy roads, but they arrived at Lake Baringo in good condition and apparently very calm. Now just one challenge remained: how do you get eight giraffes across one of Kenya’s biggest lakes?

Getting a giraffe onto a boat, never mind moving it across a lake, has never been attempted before and, given the species’ reputation for being fragile and easily

stressed, we were slightly on edge. Teams of conservationists, vets, animal translocation experts and many other helpers had worked tirelessly through the night to get the animals this far. Now, as the first rays of sun touched the lakeshore, the serenity of the scene belied the tension we felt as we stood looking at the vast expanse of water.

But the professionalism and immense knowledge of the capture team shone through. The magnificent vessel that was to be used to transport the giraffes across the lake was unveiled: an old, converted barge with a central holding area for the animals and canoes at either side to keep it stable in the water. Its capability for carrying giraffes hadn’t yet been tested, so we stood with bated breath as the first set of hooves stumbled aboard. The barge held up and soon four giraffes – the first batch – were safely loaded and ready to begin their voyage.

The Soysambu giraffes did us proud and remained placid and composed, apparently unaware that they were sailing across a huge lake and making history as they went. The crossing took about an hour, during which time the arrival bay at the Ruko Conservancy was prepared. Basically a long canvas chute, it would be hooked up to the barge and used to ‘channel’ the giraffes into their new home.

When the first vessel arrived, we were amazed to see how calm the animals seemed, slowly looking around their new environment. But they had stood patiently for a long time, first on the truck and then the boat, and now they were keen to get moving again. As



ABOVE After their voyage, the giraffes head quickly up the chute to freedom.

BELOW Rothschild’s giraffe is one of nine currently recognised giraffe subspecies in Africa, although ongoing genetic work may completely revise the species’ taxonomy as we know it now.

soon as the doors to the holding area were opened there was a clatter of hooves and all four giraffes burst off the barge and galloped up the chute to freedom – and an enormous cheer from the crowd that had gathered. The second batch fared much the same: the animals stood quietly during the smooth crossing, then rushed up the chute in an explosion of muscle and long legs.

At the end of a long day, the weary translocation team made their way back across the lake. After four years of planning and a lot of hard work, one of the most challenging and potentially risky animal relocations had been successfully executed and the Baringo giraffe had been brought home. We hope that this population will establish itself and grow, and that giraffes will occur in this part of Kenya for many years to come. **AG**

Thanks to the many partners, sponsors, conservation organisations and wildlife managers who made this translocation possible, and for the hard work of everyone involved. The Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF; [www.giraffeconservation.org](http://www.giraffeconservation.org)) is dedicated to securing a future for all giraffe populations in the wild. The Rothschild’s Giraffe Project ([www.giraffersearch.com](http://www.giraffersearch.com)) is conducting research into this Endangered subspecies with a view to developing future conservation initiatives.

## NOT-SO-TALL STORIES

- The giraffe was originally believed to be a cross between a camel and a leopard, giving rise to its scientific species name, *camelopardalis*.
- Kenya is thought to be the epicentre of giraffe evolution, since it is the only country to be home to three subspecies: Rothschild’s (right), reticulated and Maasai.
- ‘Giraffe’ is derived from the Arabic word *zirafa*, which itself probably came from an African language.
- A giraffe’s coat pattern is like a human fingerprint; each is unique and remains constant throughout the animal’s life.
- An adult giraffe requires up to 34 kilograms of food per day to fuel its large body and spends most of its time foraging.

