

# Farming in east Africa

● By David Dowling

**A**USTRALIAN farmers can get a tough time from native and feral pests such as kangaroos, pigs, goats, mice and cockatoos. But that's nothing to what some of the farmers in Africa face.

Building a fence to stop a herd of elephants is no mean feat. It must be very high and very strong and carry a severe jolt of electricity or the elephants will walk right through it. They would be backed up by buffaloes, rhinos and any number of antelope species looking for a free feed. And there is no shortage of animals, given the large numbers of game parks and reserves on the continent.

For graziers, there is also the problem of hungry lions, leopards and cheetahs taking advantage of these new prey, and losses to predators have to be factored in. In some areas, the problems are of the two-legged variety and corn crops in particular have to be guarded closely when grown close to populated areas.

So the group of Australian farmers on the recent *Greenmount Travel* tour to East Africa soon found out that agriculture is different in Africa – very different!

## Uganda

We started at Entebbe in Uganda, landing near the buildings where the Israelis rescued the hostages held by Idi Amin back in 1976. With a couple of days to get over the jetlag, we explored this attractive city on the shores of Lake Victoria – the second largest freshwater lake in the world, by surface area. One of the highlights was an excursion through the swamps surrounding the edge of the lake in search of one of the rarest, and definitely the weirdest, birds in the world – the Shoebill.

Sightings are rare but after pushing through an amazing ecosystem of reeds and marshes for 40 minutes or so, there stood the majestic shoebill. He (or she?) posed for photos for a while before a helicopter in the distance made him (or her) take flight and display its tremendous wingspan.

Next morning we visited Wagagai Farm, a massive Dutch owned flower operation with a sea of greenhouses on the shores of Lake Victoria. Here they propagate flowers for cuttings that are airfreighted directly to Europe. Both Uganda and Kenya have a climate suited to a wide variety of agricultural production. Although straddling the equator, temperatures are uniformly mild year round due to the altitude.

From Entebbe we travelled north through villages and small farms, fascinated by the extra long horned Ankole cattle on the roadsides – the “cattle of the kings.” A quick stop at a rhino sanctuary gave us our first sight of one of the African “Big 5” before a visit to a large family farm near Masindi. The whole family was there to greet us as we had a picnic lunch under the trees and the differences between Australian and African agriculture were brought into stark focus. There were a couple of old tractors and some cultivating gear but just about everything is done by hand. Planting, pest control, harvesting and initial processing all done by manual labour. We watched groups of men and women beating the recently harvested sunflower heads with sticks to dislodge the seeds. Operations which would take hours in Australia can stretch over days and weeks so lack of timeliness is a major limitation.



The strange and elusive shoebill.



Bryn Llewellyn farms on the slopes of Mount Kenya.



Ready for lift-off in the Serengeti.

The first reaction of many of our farmers was to note the inefficiencies of the system with a realisation that even minor increases in mechanisation would reap huge rewards. But it soon became clear that it wasn't all about agricultural efficiency. The farm has a large number of nearby villages with most of those people employed on the farm. Increased mechanisation would drive them out of work and create huge social problems in the community. This was a common story in all areas we visited. The other factor is that labour is cheap and plentiful.

There was no doubting the hospitality though. Kids were lining the roads and waving in their Sunday best and each of us planted a tree with a name marker and the idea is they will send a photo each year of what we christened the "Greenmount Grove."

Further north we arrived on the Nile River – the Victoria Nile just below Murchison Falls and before it empties in to Lake Albert and continues its journey all the way to Egypt. The river is alive with hippos, crocodiles and birds and the surrounding hills are a "Garden of Eden" with intermingling herds of zebras, giraffes, elephants, buffalo, warthogs and multitudes of antelope species.

Northern Uganda has seen a number of large scale farming developments with some overseas investors working together with local small farmers to increase the productivity of an area with abundant natural resources.

We travelled north to visit Jim Middleton's maize farm where farm manager Bully showed us around and explained the problems of mechanised farming in a tribal area where fences mean very little.

## Kenya

From Entebbe we (eventually) flew to Nairobi, Kenya. From Nairobi it was a 5 hour drive to the north to Nanuki, nestled on the slopes of Mount Kenya, firstly through green fertile villages and farms growing tropical crops such as pineapples, macadamias and avocados before the country became drier and more open.

We used Mount Kenya Safari Lodge as base camp as we visited some of the farms which are remnants of British colonial times.

After an hour or so on a road which we unanimously voted the worst in the world, we visited a large 16,000 acre Boran Ranch of Mandy and Jackie Kenyon. Boran cattle were developed from the native shorthorned Zebu cattle of the Borana Oromo people of southern Ethiopia. They are very well adapted to local



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**Wildebeest crossing the Mara River.**



**Cheetahs relaxing.**

conditions and parasites. Boran cattle are known for their fertility, early maturation (more so than other Zebu breeds), hardiness, and docility.

Local Masai herders are with the cattle 24 hours a day to guard against lions and intruders. Next day we travelled over a much better road to some beautiful farming areas around the slopes of Mount Kenya.

We spent the morning with Bryn Llewellyn whose farm is 2400 metres high on the northern slopes of Mount Kenya with an average rainfall of 635mm a year. This no-till operation grows a variety of crops including wheat, canola, barley, sunflowers and peas.

Permanent pastures run a small herd of Jersey cows for dairy and Boran cattle for beef, and they are also crossing Jersey and Borans with Wagyu.

With no government R&D support and limited access to new varieties, Bryn decided that Australia should be the blueprint for the development of their farming system and gives much credit to Liverpool Plains agronomist Greg Giblet whose advice sent them down the road of no-till and permanent beds and advised them on the development of a strong cooperative buying group.

## **Tanzania**

From Nairobi it was a short flight to Kilimanjaro airport with a brief glimpse of the famous tallest mountain in Africa poking through the clouds. We settled in to our lodge on the slopes of nearby Mount Meru and next morning headed to Simba farm on the outer slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. Simba Farm is an impressive operation growing wheat, barley and peas using a lot of labour and with similar problems to many of the other farms we visited.

It is hard to develop a large modern farming operation when much of the surrounding population struggles to produce enough food to feed their families.

In the afternoon we visited an avocado farm at the foot of Kilimanjaro that was established from scratch by the current owner in 2007. They are now the biggest exporters of avocados out of Tanzania. They employ 390 permanent workers and have 200 seasonal employees. In addition, they are involved in an out-grower program for over 200 small-scale local producers.

The following day we headed west from Arusha and visited a local Masai village to learn about their customs and culture and

enjoy a picnic lunch and some Masai dancing under the shade of a prickly acacia – a tree which dominates much of the savanna in Africa. Despite their terrible thorns, the leaves are quite nutritious and the local browsing animals such as giraffes, black rhinos and elephants have adapted to avoid the prickles and enjoy the leaves.

The following day was something special with a visit to the Ngorongoro Crater, once a gigantic volcano, now the largest intact caldera in the world. Before it erupted, collapsed and eroded, it may have been higher than Mt Kilimanjaro. Today it has an extensive highland area with the famous 600 metre deep crater sheltering one of the most beautiful wildlife havens on earth. Huge herds of wildebeest, zebras, hippos and various antelopes roam the fertile basin and multitudes of water birds, including flamingos, populate the lake at the bottom of the crater.

We were lucky enough to watch the tactics of a group of three female lions as they stalked and cooperated in the takedown of a warthog. The male lion took no part in this but quickly claimed the “lion’s share” of the carcass once it was available. A warthog is only a snack for this pride of six lions, so another kill was probably needed that night, and they had no shortage of options.

From Ngorongoro, it is not far to the entrance to the Serengeti National Park, a huge protected area with a large population of all the usual African animals including abundant large predators including over 3000 lions, 1000 leopards, 8000 hyenas and many cheetahs. The cats have plenty to eat as the annual migration including two million wildebeest, 250,000 zebras and 500,000 gazelles follows the rains and grass feed between the southern Serengeti and the Masai Mara of Kenya and back again. The most famous view is of wildebeest herds in their crazy gallop across the Mara River in northern Serengeti as fat crocodiles feed on the weakest.

In an amazing stroke of luck, we arrived at the Mara River just as one of the first crossings started. We were barracking for the wildebeest, not the crocodiles, and of the several thousand who crossed that day, only one was taken. The vast herds continued to build the next day and we were lucky to witness another migration or two.

Then it was time for our own migration back to Australia with a charter flight to Arusha and connections back home after an unforgettable experience. ■