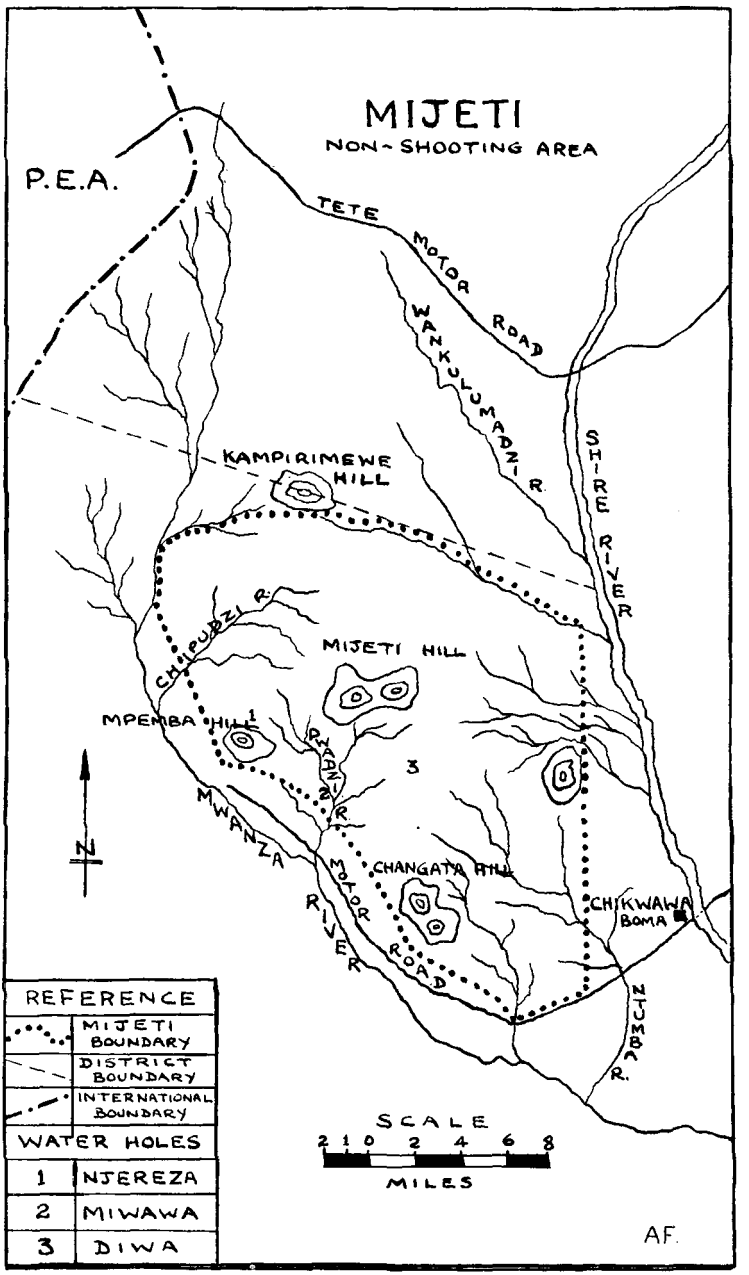
THE MIJETI

By G. D. HAYES, Secretary of The Fauna Preservation Society of Nyasaland

The Mijeti Non-Shooting Area, in the north-west corner of the Chikwawa district of Nyasaland, comprises some 150–200 square miles of very broken and stony hill country clothed mostly with rather poor *Brachystegia* scrub, though small areas of better-grown *Brachystegia* and *Pterocarpus* are to be found. The grass on the hills is seldom higher than about 3 feet, but in the dambos it often reaches a height of 8 to 10 feet. These " dambos " are open grassy glades which may be quite dry for half the year but which, owing to the high water-table during the rains, are almost treeless.

The Mijeti area is a low plateau or shelf of the Rift Valley which drops steeply on its southern and western boundaries to the valley of the Mwanza river. A number of larger hills, such as Changata, Mphemba, Kampirimbewe, Kampiringombe and Mijeti itself rise several hundred feet above the surrounding country. The whole area is intersected by numerous " sand rivers " which carry water only in the wet season (November to March). The Pwadzi river, however, can be counted on in a year of good rain-fall to carry water all the year round, in its upper reaches at least. In a year of poor rainfall it will probably be completely dry by September and when this happens the game has to rely on the few permanent water-holes, or else make its way to the Mwanza river, which is outside the non-shooting limits for most of its length. As the cultivation of the district is confined very largely to the banks of this river, any breakout by the game population of the Mijeti has to be prevented. The provision of adequate and stable water supplies is therefore of the greatest importance if the area is to qualify for game reserve status.

The rough and wild nature of the country has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of publicity is absent, for there is little chance of visitors ever being able to see the animals in large herds from motor cars, even when it is found possible to construct roads through the area. On the other hand, the area now affords considerable protection from poaching. It had been the practice in the past for native hunters to haunt the vicinity of the water-holes and to continue killing the game there until it became too shy and was forced to go through the cultivation in the valley, to the rivers outside the sanctuary of the hills; but the appointment of a native game guard in July, 1953, whose



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wages were paid by the Fauna Preservation Society, has gone a long way in putting a stop to the activities of these butchers. The guard, Biton Balandow by name, is a small man with a big reputation. A native of the Chikwawa district, he is the son of a well-known medicine man and himself has a considerable knowledge of herbal remedies. He was for a number of years a native agricultural instructor and is well known and respected throughout the district. His reports, which are rendered monthly through the District Commissioner, are full of interest, giving details of sections visited, numbers of animals seen, and the state of water and food supplies. During the last few months he reports having seen elephant, eland, kudu, water-buck and warthog in fair numbers, and several small herds of sable and hartebeeste ; he has also seen several bush-buck. He states that most of the herds were accompanied by quite young animals. In addition to these animals the Mijeti is known to harbour reed-buck, common duiker, klipspringer, Sharpe's stienbuck, Burchell's zebra, lion, leopard, hyaena and jackal. Mr. B. L. Mitchell claims that roan antelope are also present, but I have no other evidence of this. From Biton's own account he is quite terrified of the elephants, and yet he takes the most fantastic risks so that he can count the numbers in each herd he finds. In actual fact the Mijeti elephants are a fairly docile lot, as Biton well knows but, like all his kind, he likes to make a good story of it !

The idea of turning the Mijeti into a game reserve originated just before the outbreak of the last war when a lone elephant bull, which had been raiding gardens in the Mwanza valley and was being hunted for his sins, led the pursuit into the heart of the hills on one of the hottest November days on record. Although he was sighted on more than one occasion the line he took was through such difficult country that he eventually got away without a shot being fired. It was realized then that this wild, uninhabited region would make an ideal game reserve if only the animals could be persuaded to remain within its boundaries. The war intervened and nothing was done until 1947, when the Nyasaland Fauna Preservation Society came into being. One of the first things the Society interested itself in was the selection of areas suitable for game reserves, and the Mijeti was given priority. Then came a long period of investigation for, without all the facts, it was useless to put forward any scheme to government. A number of expeditions were made to get information on water supplies, grazing, potential value of the land for agricultural or forestry purposes, etc. Several of these

expeditions were accompanied by government officers: the District Commissioner was naturally a member of the first party, while officers of the Game Control, Forestry, and Agricultural departments joined later ones. Eventually no one laid claim to the area and in 1950 a request was made to Government that the Mijeti should be declared a game reserve. The shortage of water was, however, a serious difficulty, and Government would only agree to give the Mijeti the status of a non-shooting area, until it could be proved that the game could be kept all the year round within its boundaries. Faced with this challenge the N.F.P.S. decided to do everything within its powers to meet the demand for water, and funds were voted from meagre resources for the building of dams and otherwise improving supplies.

The first step was to decide which of the three known permanent water-holes would give the quickest returns if improvements were carried out. These holes are known, in order of importance, as the " Njereza ", taking its name from an outcrop of limestone in the vicinity (njereza is the native name for lime); the " Miwawa ", which is situated in the bed of the Pwadzi stream and is named after a number of very beautiful African mahogany trees (native name " Mbawa ") which grow on the banks at this spot, and the " Diwa ", which takes its name from two small conical hills about a mile away. This last hole appears a most unlikely permanent supply, for it is nothing more than a pond in a bamboo brake, but it must be maintained by a strong underground spring, for it has never been known to dry up; when it gets low in a year of short rainfall the elephants are reputed to dig it out. There are a number of other semi-permanent water-holes, situated in streams such as the Chipudzi, the Kakhoma, and the Nthumba, which will probably pay for attention when the first three have been dealt with. It was decided to start with the " Njereza ", and a party with the necessary tools and materials visited this water-hole during the dry season of 1952. The " Njereza " is situated in a small stream which rises on the slopes of Mphemba hill and flows roughly north. The stream itself is only a storm drain, but a short distance above the pool permanent water emerges and drops over a series of small waterfalls into the pool, which is some 20 feet in diameter. From here it disappears underground but appears again about half a mile further downstream. With the idea of improving the reservoir above the waterfalls a small rock and cement dam was built in the bed of the stream. Another dam of a similar nature was constructed below the point downstream where the water rises to the surface. Here there is a long

reach where the stream bed is almost level, and it was hoped that the dam would have the effect of containing a large quantity of water beneath the sand, where the animals can be trusted to dig in case of need. Biton Balandow reports that these dams are serving their purpose and a big drive is to be made during the coming dry season to construct as many other dams as is possible with the funds available.

THE NYIKA PLATEAU, NYASALAND

By J. C. Cater

So little is known about the Nyika plateau that even the observations of an amateur may be of use in reaching a better understanding of this wonderful stretch of mountain country. I first visited the Nyika in 1950 and returned the following year with two colleagues, to investigate forestry possibilities. In July, 1952, we opened a camp and started a forestry pilot scheme. Our work has given us an exceptional opportunity to watch the game and study the flora and climate. Our camp, some 3½ miles south-east of Kaulime Pond, is at an altitude of 7,700 feet and stands in typical short-grass country near the headwaters of Chelinda River.

C. W. Benson has given the area of the Nyika plateau as 1,400 square miles, but the area of the grasslands is considerably less, probably in the vicinity of 500,000 acres. Unfortunately there is no accurate map of the plateau, and only about half of it has been covered by aerial photography. Most of the short-grass area lies between 7,000 and 8,000 feet, but there are many hills rising above 8,000 feet; the highest point, Nganda, is just over 9,000 feet. It is very noticeable that the topography of the western half of the plateau is gentler than the eastern half, the dividing line being the watershed that runs south from Nganda to Chejara. North of Nganda the ground falls steeply several thousand feet and, for about 12 miles, the vegetation is *Brachystegia* woodland, until the grasslands of Kawoza Peaks are reached.

The Nyika is surprisingly cold, even in summer. At our camp the highest shade temperature recorded in a Stevenson screen over a period of eighteen months was 74 degrees Fahrenheit. November was the warmest month, with a mean maximum temperature of 70 degrees and a mean minimum of 51·5 degrees. The mean annual maximum and minimum temperatures were 64·5 and 46 degrees. Frosts occur from late May until early