

Great Ruaha River Water Level | 2009

February – April 2009

Hello everyone,

This update on the Great Ruaha River is long overdue, but I have been away.

As many of you know the Great Ruaha River was in a drastic state. It was completely dry from October 2008 right through to mid-March 2009. That is five and a half months which is the longest dry period ever recorded.

It is true that generally the rain in the immediate Ruaha National Park catchment was extremely poor over much of the season. As a result many of the small rivers such as the Jongomero, Itiku, Mdonya etc. only flooded for very short periods; the water never reaching the Great Ruaha River. Thus, the Great Ruaha River remained completely dry until mid-March, at which point the rainfall in the Ruaha NP catchment improved a little, giving the sand rivers enough to flood. The Ruaha was 'flowing' in short sections for only a few days at a time.

Finally the 'black water' from Usangu (Ihefu water) arrived towards the end of March, giving the river new life.

I would like to remind you that in the catchment proper (e.g. the rivers flowing into the Usangu Basin, Mbarali, Ndembera etc.), all of the rivers and their upper catchment areas had extremely good rainfall, which was way above average. These rivers were all flooding from mid-November right through to April. That means that four and a half months of flood waters from seven rivers have largely been used by agriculture in the Usangu basin. Only in the final (5th) month of the rains did this massive amount of water make its way down through the Giriama gap to the Ruaha NP and on to the Mtera dam.

In normal years the flood water from Usangu reaches Ruaha NP in February (assuming that the rains start in mid-December). Therefore, please note that as the rivers have been flooding since November, the water from Usangu should have reached Ruaha NP in mid-January this year. However, it didn't reach us until the end of March.



Great Ruaha River | Upstream & downstream from Ruaha River Lodge | 23rd February 2009

Here are photos taken from various locations in February 2009 and a photo taken by Andrew Molinaro (Jongomero Camp), a few days ago on 13th April.



Great Ruaha River | Downstream from Sue's Old Camp | 13th April 2009

The river is now flowing bank to bank. The location this photo was taken is from Robs old camp. I know from experience that according to what I see in the photo, the river must be reasonably high, probably covering the stone marker used at my camp. However, judging from the colour of the water it is not very deep so I doubt it will last at this height for very much longer. I will guess it will start to go down by the beginning of May.

I think we are all aware that the situation of the Ruaha River is now critical. It is of national importance that we take measures to ensure that the water from this life giving river sustains all its stakeholders. This includes Ruaha National Park, Mtera Dam, the fishermen there and on down to the Rufiji basin developments. It is very possible to have great agriculture in Usangu and still have the river flowing down to the sea. All it will take is positive cooperation from all parties concerned.

Thank you all for your hard work to make this become a reality.

Kind regards,

Sue

June – August 2009

The river is not looking too bad for this time of year; however, as per usual, it has dropped significantly over a short period of time.

Judging by the viewpoint from my old camp, the river has dropped fast from 10th June to 13th July, over a 5 week period. Just to remind you, the stone marker that I use is approximately 7 feet high from its base on the sand to the top of the rock.

I suspect we will see the same trend as last year, in that the river will continue to drop fairly fast until it reaches a shallow trickle and will stop altogether at the beginning of October when the rice growers start planting their seedlings.

This year, Ruaha National Park received very poor rainfall. As a result, the springs in the sand-rivers and surrounding areas are mostly dry already. Therefore, the animals will face a big problem later on in the season. In fact, over the past few years due to the drying of the river, game viewing has really deteriorated from the end of September through to December. Previously, when the river was in better shape, these dry months were Ruaha's prime game viewing months.

Although the actual level does not look so dramatically different, the surrounding water in the channels in the foreground and near the banks has dried up a lot. Further downstream where the river widens it is very obvious that the river has dried up quite significantly in the past 4 weeks.

Kind regards,

Sue

October 2009

We are all thrilled to tell you that not only is the river still flowing up at Jongomero, but there is still a trickle of water reaching the Lunda end of the park. We have not had water down to Lunda in October for 14 years. This is an historic year! The photos below show how the river looks at the moment.



Great Ruaha River | Main Bridge | 20th October 2009



Great Ruaha River | Stone Marker – Sue's Old Camp | 20th October 2009

The above two photos show the water at my old camp (in the Jongomero area), some 50km upstream from the gate. The flowing portion is on the left of the rock in the picture on the left. The picture on the right shows a close up of the flowing portion.

Although the flow is not a torrent, it is certainly what we have all been working towards. This indicates that preserving the wetland from thousands of cattle, and shifting some of the small scale farmers has resulted in a marked difference achieved.

I find this incredibly encouraging. Considering that Ruaha NP received very poor rainfall this year, and that water off-take continues on a massive scale due to irrigation in the catchment area, it proves that it doesn't take very much to improve the situation. Therefore, with more effort directed to proper management of these precious water reserves, the objective of ensuring that the flow of the GRR reaches the Mtera Dam will be realized. This would be a remarkable achievement for Tanzania.

The depth and width of flow in the Lunda area during August and September was also really encouraging. I do hope that this progress continues, ensuring water for future generations is ensuring a future for Tanzania. I would like to congratulate Ruaha National Park for its efforts; protecting the Usangu Wetland has not been an easy situation to administer.

December 2009

Due to early rains the river was flowing well at the beginning of November. The Jongomero River had several good floods which cleaned out the old pools and assisted the Great Ruaha River to flow well past Msembe HQ and on down to Lunda. This was fantastic news for normally November is when the GRR is completely dry.

However, since 21st November the rain has stopped. But the good news is the river is still flowing past Msembe HQ, and attached is a photo of the river as it flows under the bridge on 5th December. You will see there are two channels flowing now. The photo I sent in October depicted only one channel flowing under the bridge. Therefore, despite the rain stopping, the river has improved slightly since October. To date the GRR has not stopped flowing this dry season. Let us hope the rain returns soon.



Great Ruaha River | Main Bridge | 5th December 2009