



# Safety Corner

Gerard Bos

Dear Yenzi residents,

As you are aware of, in the weekend 6 and 7 March we organised a 'mini research project' on the possible presence of crocodiles in Lake Yenzi. The aim was to determine if present, and if so to what extent, crocodiles would constitute a hazard to people using the lake for recreational purposes. Olivier Pauwels, herpetologist of WWF, was engaged to carry out this survey. Below you find the report compiled by Olivier, though Olivier insisted my name being mentioned as co-author, I hasten to admit that my only contribution was the explanation of some of the terms and phrases used. The scientific input is, obviously, largely that of Olivier. As a herpetologist, he doesn't mention some of the bird species we've also seen, whilst being out on the lake, like the Giant Kingfisher, Senegalese kingfisher, Malechite Kingfisher, African darter, African finfoot, Palm nut vulture and many others!

The report itself is largely self explanatory, but if you do have any question or queries, please do not hesitate to contact me!

Gerard.

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## The Shy Scaly Monsters of Lake Yenzi

Olivier S. G. Pauwels & Gerard Bos

There were a number of reports of crocodile sightings on the banks of Lake Yenzi, and time has come to evaluate the danger they might represent to local residents, particularly in regard to the various watersport activities. A short survey was thus organized, with sponsoring by Frank Denelle and the HSE Department, and with the much appreciated logistic support of Shane, Robert, Terry and Klaas.

Firstly, a presentation of the various species of crocodiles found in Gabon is necessary. Three species are known from the country, and all three have also been recorded from the Gamba Complex of Protected Areas. The most common one, the **Dwarf Crocodile (*Osteolaemus tetraspis*)**, is, as its name indicates, a very small species. It has a dark brown colour, does not reach two meters (tail included), and lives mainly in shallow forest streams and in swamps with much vegetation. It was never recorded in open waters in Gabon. It feeds mainly on invertebrates (millipedes, shrimps, etc.) and on small vertebrates (shrews, frogs, etc.), and represents no danger for Humans, although it would of course bite if handled.

The second most common species is the **Long-snout Crocodile (*Crocodylus cataphractus*)**, called caïman by the Gabonese. It can reach a fairly large size (up to 4 meters), but there are no confirmed records of attacks on Humans. Its diet is mainly composed of fish, sometimes small mammals, and juveniles also eat invertebrates such as insects. It lives in rivers with much vegetation cover and in lakes, and is for instance very common in Lake Divangu north of Rabi where one can easily observe it with binoculars from the banks. The third species, the **Nile Crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus*)**, is the only dangerous one, and fortunately the



least common in the area. It reaches a length of 6 meters and its diet is very varied, from the insects eaten by juveniles to young hippos and buffalos killed by large adults. It likes open places with many basking areas, large rivers, and river mouths. In the Gamba Complex, although localized, it is particularly abundant on beaches and in lagoons and mangroves in Loango National Park near Sette Cama.

During our recent four days survey of Lake Yenzi (from 4 to 7 March), we did one pedestrian and four motor boat surveys, including a 3 hour night survey, for a total of nine hours totally dedicated to a careful scrutinization of the lake. Diurnal (= daytime) surveys were intended to detect specimens basking on logs or banks, the night survey to encounter active and hunting animals. In the afternoon of 5 March we briefly saw an **Aubry's Softshell Turtle** (*Cycloderma aubryi*) that quickly plunged from the log where it was enjoying sun. During our day surveys we observed four subadults of the **African Forest Monitor** (*Varanus ornatus*), a large lizard that can reach a total length of nearly two meters, and be hence sometimes mistaken for a crocodile, although its body is much more gracile. Monitors do not represent any danger, but would give nasty bites if approached too closely. On 7 March we even saw an **African Ornate Water Snake** (*Grayia ornata*), a piscivorous (meaning 'fish-eating') snake which is locally common in swamps, rivers and lakes. It is harmless, but for non-specialists it is difficult to distinguish it from the deadly venomous African Banded Water Cobra (*Boulengerina annulata annulata*), widely distributed in Gabon and surrounding countries, but not yet recorded from the Gamba Complex where it is however probably present. These aquatic snakes are shy and do not attack, but, like turtles and monitors, would defend themselves and bite if handled. Besides all these reptiles, we did not see a single crocodile... which does not mean that they are absent from the lake! Reptiles are often shy, and their observation can be difficult. Nevertheless, there were enough reliable reports of observations of crocodiles by Yenzi residents to be sure that they are effectively present. The question is to know which species, since only one species represents a hazard to man. Lake Yenzi is a very convenient environment for the Long-snout Crocodile, and the swamps connected to the lake constitute a biotope that is generally much appreciated by the Dwarf Crocodile. There is thus a very high probability that both species occur in the lake, especially since they are known from many localities elsewhere in the Gamba Complex. There are too few open areas and beaches around Lake Yenzi to make Nile Crocodiles happy, but their presence can however not be excluded.

The next step towards a better evaluation of the potential danger locally represented by crocodiles is that Yenzi residents systematically report crocodile observations, and when possible take pictures and send them to us ([gerard.bos@shell.com](mailto:gerard.bos@shell.com) and [osgpauwels@yahoo.fr](mailto:osgpauwels@yahoo.fr)). Two of these three species of crocodiles were abundantly illustrated in the recent book "Gabon: Paradis de la Biodiversité" (Ward et al. 2003); the third one, the Long-snout Crocodile, can easily be distinguished from both by its narrow, very elongate mouth. Any sighting of a crocodile over 4 meters long would automatically indicate the presence of the Nile Crocodile. As long as the presence of the Nile Crocodile is not established in the lake, there is no reason to stop activities such as water skiing and sailing. Moreover, Nile Crocodiles spend most of their time near the lake banks, and are rarely found in the middle of the lakes, where these sport activities take place. Concerning water skiing, Nile Crocodiles would also be most probably too scared by the noise of the motor at high speed and the sudden movements of the water skiers to envisage any attack. We do not recommend that little children swim in the lake, even if the risk seems limited. This is also true for other localities where people (so not only children!) sometimes swim, like the Sette Cama area, where 'monsters' of more than four meters were observed!