

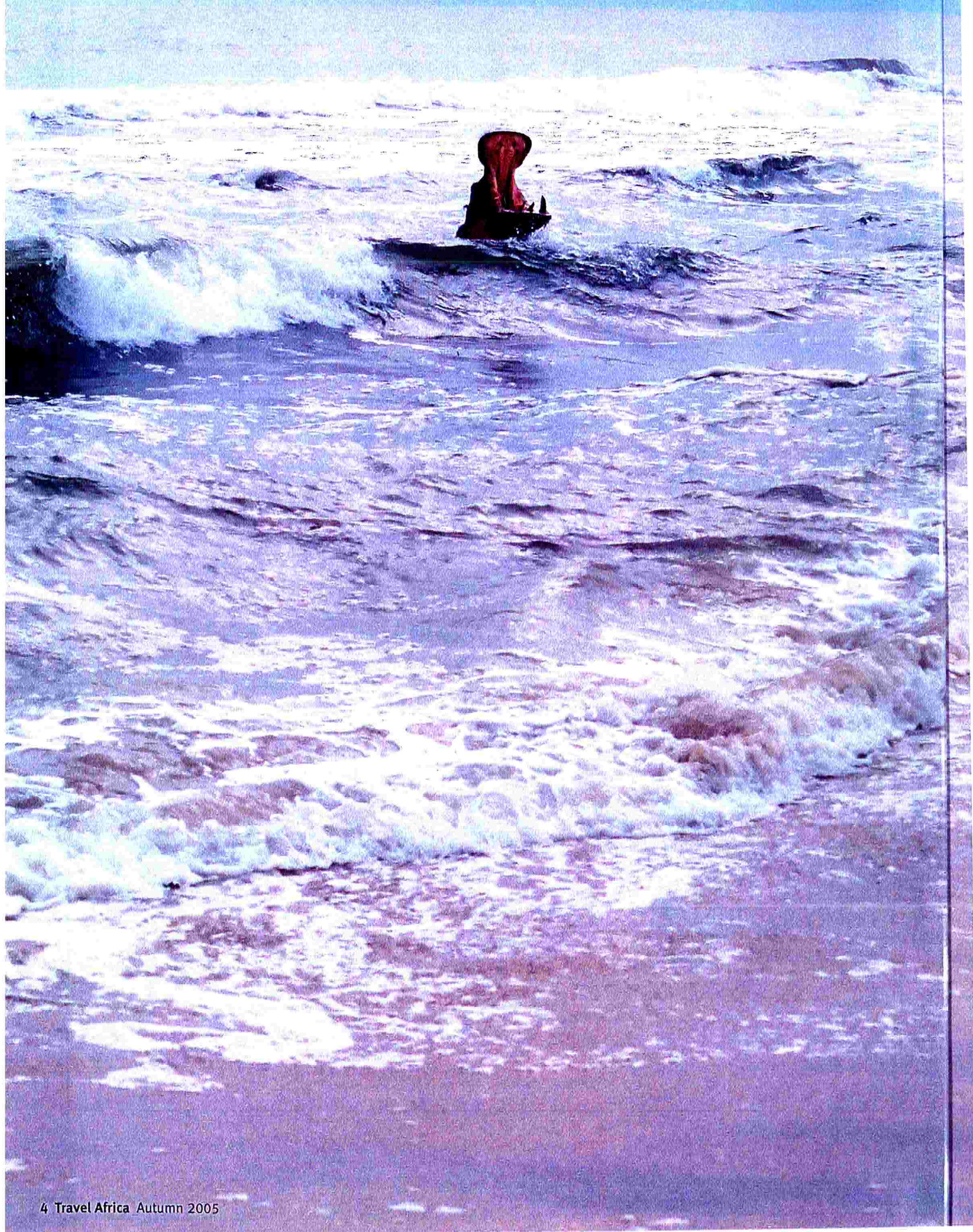
Secret world

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This is Africa





Surf's up

Michael Nichols, photographer

Standard male hippo display: open mouth, look big, make noise. I was so excited, I acted like a fool, afraid he would disappear into thin air before I could shoot.

One of my goals when I first came to Gabon's Loango coast had been to photograph hippos in the Atlantic ocean. Now, because of the articles my colleagues and I have had published in *National Geographic*, the surfing hippo – this giant, uncharismatic beast frolicking in the water –

has become Loango's signature image.

Surfing hippos are not easy to capture on film. Probably because of human predation in the past, they enter the sea at dusk or dark and come home to their lagoon at dawn.

There is one family of hippos that surf: a huge male, their mother and the kids. Loango has now been protected for three years, and soon there may be surfing hippos all along this part of the coast.

As for me, I'm not much of a water person. Getting my feet wet was as far out in the ocean as I made it during our seven-month camp on the shore.

Hippopotamus in the Atlantic, Loango National Park, Gabon from The Last Place on Earth by Michael Nichols and Mike Fay (National Geographic). A selection of photos from Michael Nichols' travels in the forests of Central Africa begins on page 74.

Secret world

American ecologist Mike Fay knew from his lengthy explorations of the forests of Central Africa that there was much to be discovered in this challenging wilderness, but its natural riches were vanishing fast. In 1999 he set himself a task he called the Megatransect Expedition, a walk that would take him from Bomassa in Congo to Loango in Gabon, collecting data on flora and fauna and monitoring human impact on the environment along the way.

Accompanying him on the expedition was *National Geographic* photographer Michael Nichols.

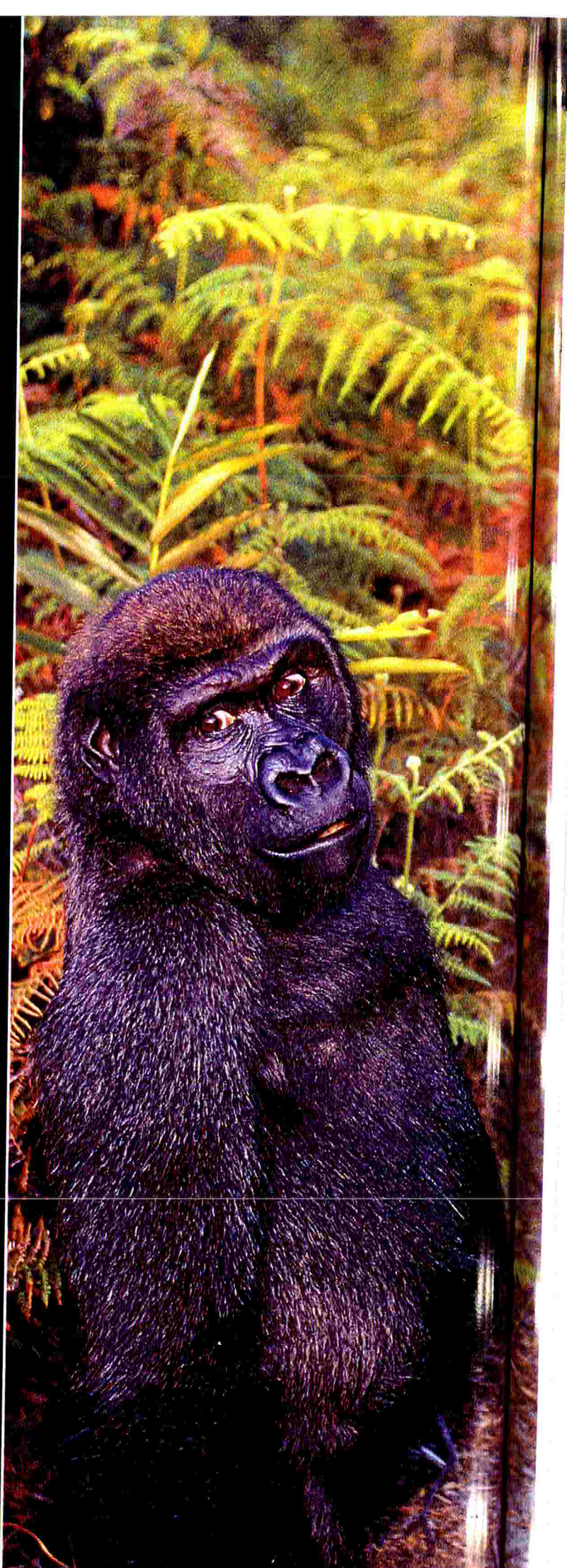
Despite bouts of illness, exhaustion, and threats from armed poachers, the pair were driven to complete the trek by their shared fierce determination to help document and preserve this territory and its wildlife.

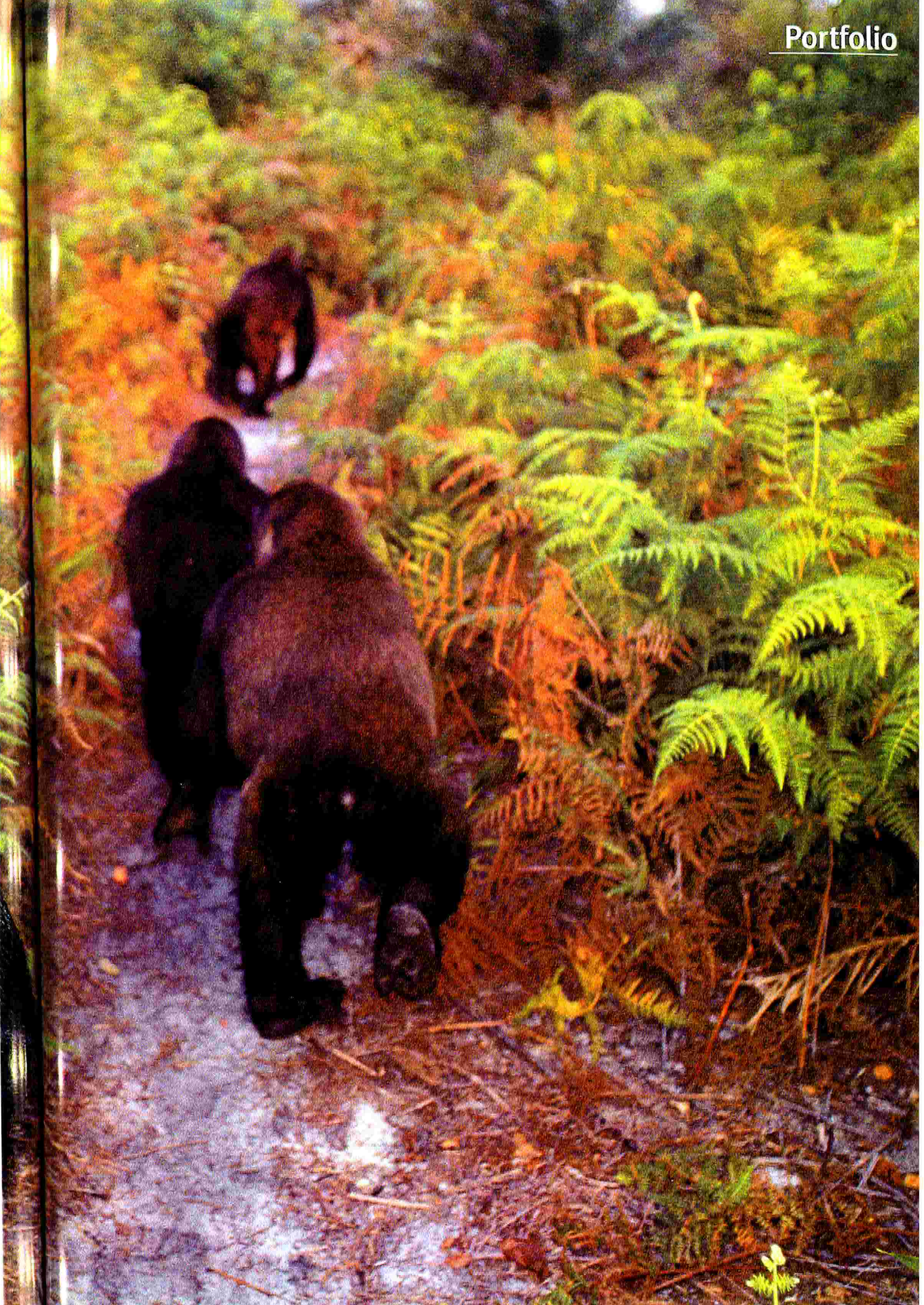
Nichols' work captures a hidden world where forest elephants are glimpsed, fleetingly, through foliage, lowland gorillas bathe waist-deep in the cool water of marshy clearings, and chimpanzees stare in astonishment at a primate they very rarely see – man.

These images, together with Fay's data, were enough to inspire the government of Gabon to protect a significant proportion of that country's virgin rainforest from loggers, bush meat traders and ivory poachers by creating thirteen new national parks.

Lowland gorillas, Congo

Since 1990, the UK-based Gorilla Protection Project (PPG) has learned through trial and error how hard it is to keep orphan gorillas alive and ultimately give them a chance to live in the wild once more. These orphans, traumatised by losing their mothers to poachers, are cared for by humans and taken to the forest each day for foraging and play. The goal: to create groups that can fend for themselves.





Michael Nichols:

Documenting the last place on earth

By David Quammen

In this forest live elephants. *Loxodonta cyclotis*, a different species from the one on the sunny grasslands of East Africa – smaller and more furtive. They operate at close range in the understory. If you annoy them enough, or frighten them a little, they will do their best to kill you, and their best can be very good.

In this forest live lowland gorillas. Painfully shy, pacific, vegetarian, explosive. Also in this forest live chimpanzees that haven't learned fear of humans. They've been lucky so far, too remote to be shot and eaten. They'll come towards you to ogle. In this forest live Pygmy peoples, Babanzélé, Bangombé and others, almost uninfected by outside culture. To say they love the dark woods and are happy to be there would be presumptuous, irrelevant and silly; it's their world. In this forest live magnificently fat and quite poisonous snakes – Gaboon vipers – that make themselves invisible among fallen leaves. They're patient. In this forest live red river hogs and skittish duikers and hornbills with noisy wings. Leopards too, although you'll never see



Michael Nichols, known as Nick, suffering from a bee sting on location in Loango National Park, Gabon

Michael Nichols was here to document (in images), as was I (in words), Mike Fay's Megatransect Expedition, a wildly ambitious 2000-mile, 456-day trek. Both of us were on assignment to *National Geographic* magazine. But Nichols' involvement was deeper than mine, his professional commitment broader. I was coming and going for snatches of the whole experience, no more than three weeks to a snatch; Nichols was devoting himself completely to the Megatransect, and also using it as a way to pursue his own long-term project of representing the look, the feel and the dynamic throb of Central African ecosystems.

Nichols and I enjoyed a conspiratorial sense of fellowship based on various shared convictions, including but not limited to these two: that Fay is demented, impossible, obdurate, aggravating, and the best of all people with whom to hike through an African jungle; and that this place to which Fay had enticed us – this great sweep of continuous forest and swamp and black-water streams and brown rivers, stretching from the northeastern border of the Republic of Congo to the southwestern coast of Gabon, and encompassing large portions of the Congo and Ogooué River drainages – is a uniquely spectacular and precious hunk of territory. When Nichols calls it "the last place on earth" without specifying last of what, I think I know what he means. Or at least how he feels. I think he feels that there's just nowhere else, anywhere, anymore, not even the Amazon (which lacks charging elephants), that can match its pageant and scope of tropical wildness.

Nichols is a photographer who works from his heart and his gut, not just from his eye and that pink spongy organ behind it

one. Ground-runner vines, thorny and mean, that make your feet bleed. Huge trees that drop weird, tasty fruit. In this forest lives the Ebola virus, somewhere, hiding unobtrusively within a reservoir species (a rodent? a bat?) during the intervals between its gruesome outbreaks among humans and apes. In this forest live spiders, rather large as spiders go, that you wouldn't want to be surprised to find crawling on your neck. Sweat bees in blinding abundance. Termites that, in a night, can eat the floor of your tent. Crickets that George Lucas couldn't dream up. Brigades and divisions of some of the planer's most belligerent ants. Oh, and leeches, of course, they live here too. Giant centipedes. Giant moths. Dwarf crocodiles. Giant pangolins. All these and plenty more.



Feeling, not just thinking, is important here, because Nichols is a photographer who works from his heart and his gut, not just from his eye and that pink spongy organ behind it. Movement, tension, action – those are inherent in his work. He doesn't compose pretty, tidy images; he's more interested in vitality and flux. Events are *happening*, or about to happen, in his photographs, and when beauty is there it's generally because beauty itself happened in some isolated, difficult spot. Ugliness often happens too. Change happens, remorseless and saddening; that's part of the story. Another part is darkness and quietude. Within the forest, beneath its dense canopy, the light is dim (but not gloomy), and Nichols' photographs capture that, intentionally. He honours the reality of this place in which light itself is a scarce resource.

Nichols takes risks, and not just physically. He trusts his audience – that's you, the looker at these photographs – to let the eye linger while the imagination moves. What he cares about most are the reality of the moment and the power of the place. It seems very safe to say that his goal – unabashedly political, in its way, as well as artistic – is to make others care about the place and the moment too.



Above: Young mandrill, Gabon

This young mandrill was found in a hunting camp upstream from the Ivindo River's Kongué waterfalls. Its mother had been eaten.

Top: Forest elephants, Gabon

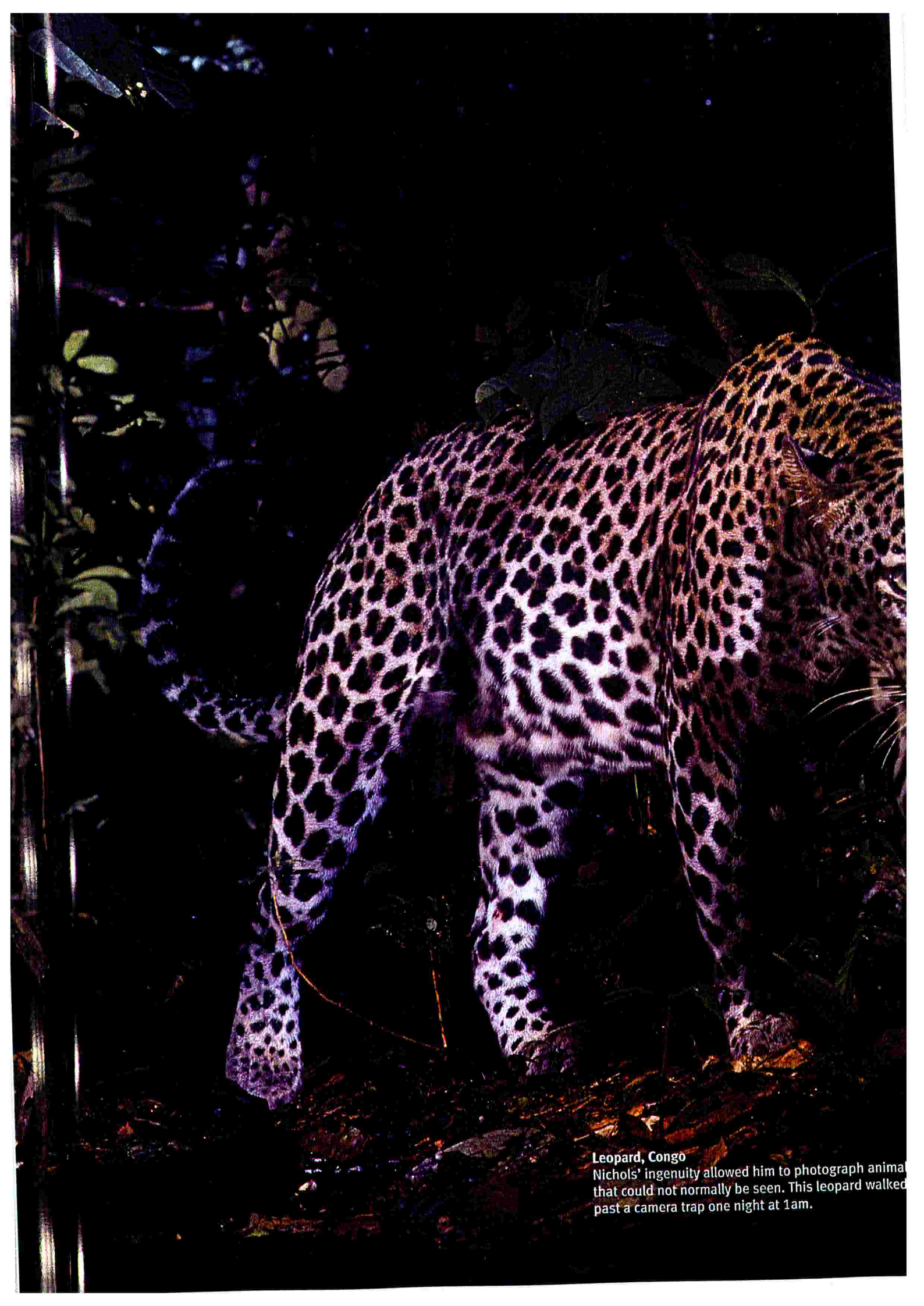
Nichols devised infra-red camera traps, tree-stands and hides to capture intimate images of elusive animals. This photograph of elephants strolling through the forest on the way to the coast was taken with a camera trap set for small predators: the elephants triggered the shutter by breaking the infra-red beam.

“Dark in this forest is not just *dark*,
it is that **pitch-black**
dark in which you can put your hand right
in front of your face and see **nothing**”

Mike Fay

“Working in Central Africa
has made me **patient.**
Everything is on nature's terms”

Michael Nichols



Leopard, Congo
Nichols' ingenuity allowed him to photograph animals that could not normally be seen. This leopard walked past a camera trap one night at 1am.

Chimpanzees in the Congo

In a few remote pockets of Central Africa, there are gorillas and chimpanzees whose contact with people has been so fleeting, they don't know that humans are predators. **Mike Fay** recalls the day he introduced Michael Nichols to the 'naïve' chimpanzees of the Goulougo region.

The Goulougo is a major branch of the Ndoki river in the Congo – I'm not even sure that 'Goulougo' is its real name, it just appeared on an old French topographic map, so that's what we called it. This was deep forest, and the elephant trails along the Goulougo were two metres wide. We never found any signs of humans out here, except oil-palm nuts maybe two thousand years old. Not for a couple of millennia have people had the need, or the skill, to penetrate this deep into a forest that was completely surrounded by swamps.

We all had chimps on our minds. We crossed our camp creek, walked just a few hundred metres, and sat to make a duiker call. Everyone huddled together. I squeezed my nose, closed off my oesophagus, pumped up my lungs, and let out two low, guttural bleats:

"Miiyaaaaooooou, miiyaaaaooooou."

It wasn't more than a few seconds before we heard that mad, ferocious rush towards us. This was no duiker – these were chimps, more than one. This rush gives you a

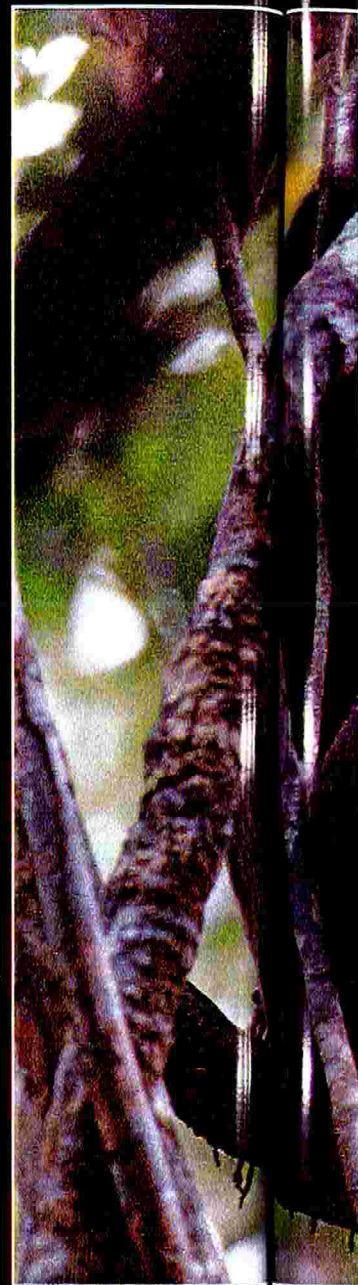
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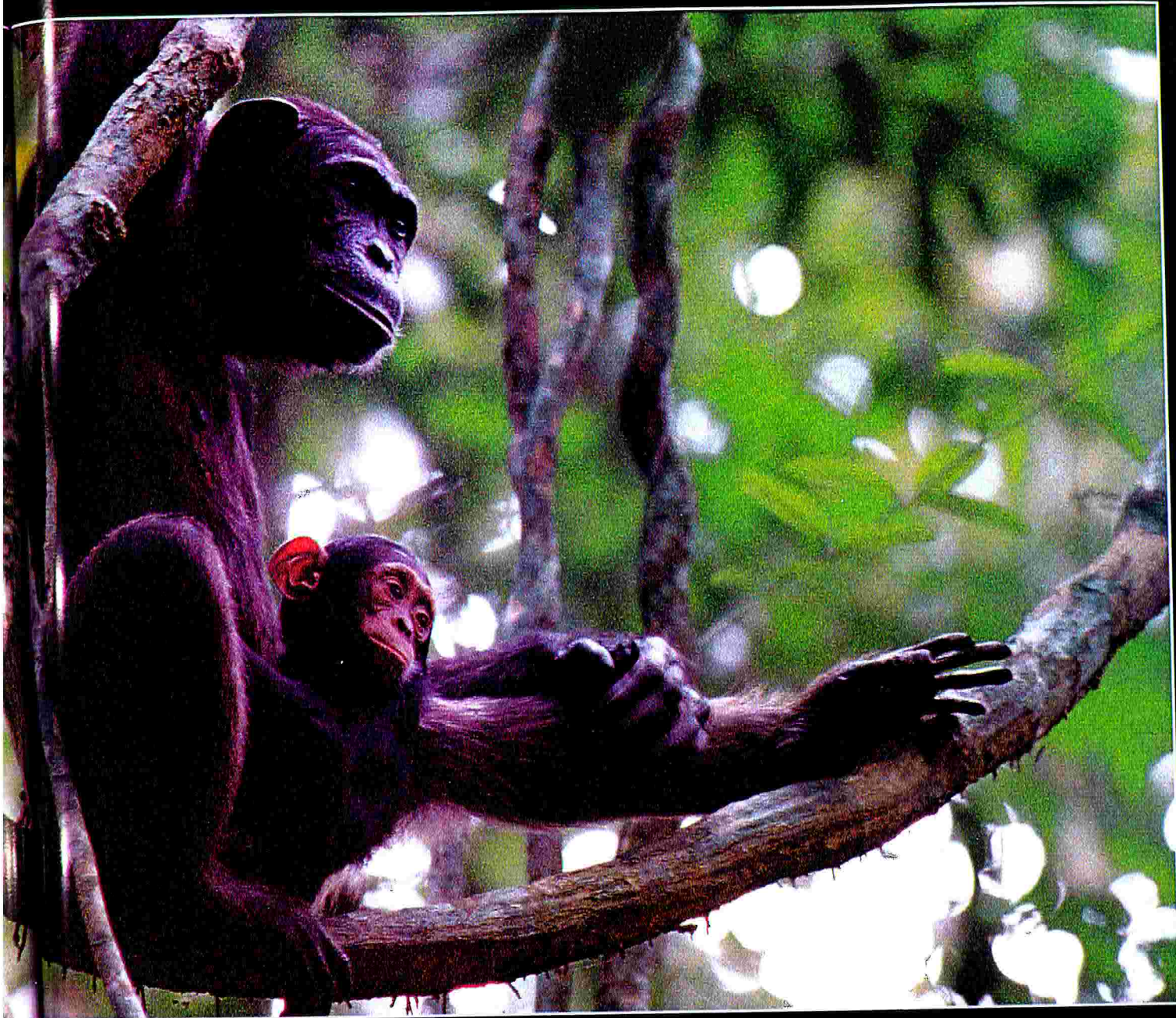
desperate feeling of being pursued with nowhere to run – no matter how fast you'd go, you would be caught and devoured. But we stayed put, and in an instant there was a hulk of a male chimpanzee only metres away who had just stopped in his track, dumbfounded – we were clearly not something to be ripped to shreds for lunch. We knew about 'naïve' chimpanzees; he didn't know about humans. Then there were two, then four of these jumbo males. The lead attacker retreated a couple of steps, looking for a little distance between himself and these alien creatures. The others, confirming his hallucination, stopped and also took a few steps back. They weren't running away though, they were just seeking a little refuge – all climbing flimsy saplings, a few centimetres in diameter, to get a better vantage point on us. They stared intently at these new primates they had discovered. You could see it in their eyes, asking: "What beast is this? How could it be we have never seen this creature before in our forest? They have hands like us, bodies like us, eyes like us." It didn't take long for them to break out into a frantic series of pant-hoots. They were calling everybody else in to see this crazy thing they had found.

The Pygmies were making faces and taking aim with imaginary guns, as they do. (I could only imagine, if the guys had real shotguns and were out on a logging prospection in this forest, those chimps, within seconds of first meeting humans, would have met death.) Nick

unpacked his 600mm lens and gargantuan tripod to capture something that no human had ever recorded. He went into his trance. Mothers with babies came within metres and settled down, hardly vocalising, just watching. Youngsters eventually got restless and were allowed to venture off on their own. The young males started making daring moves closer to us, showing their buddies how brave they were.

How strange this was, this first connection between human and chimpanzee. How strange this need to connect, to watch, to communicate in subtle ways. Both sides were catapulted into a state of mind that says: "Yes, it is possible that one day you will wake up, and something that goes beyond anything that you have ever imagined becomes reality."





Far left: Crossing the Goulougo swamps, Central Africa

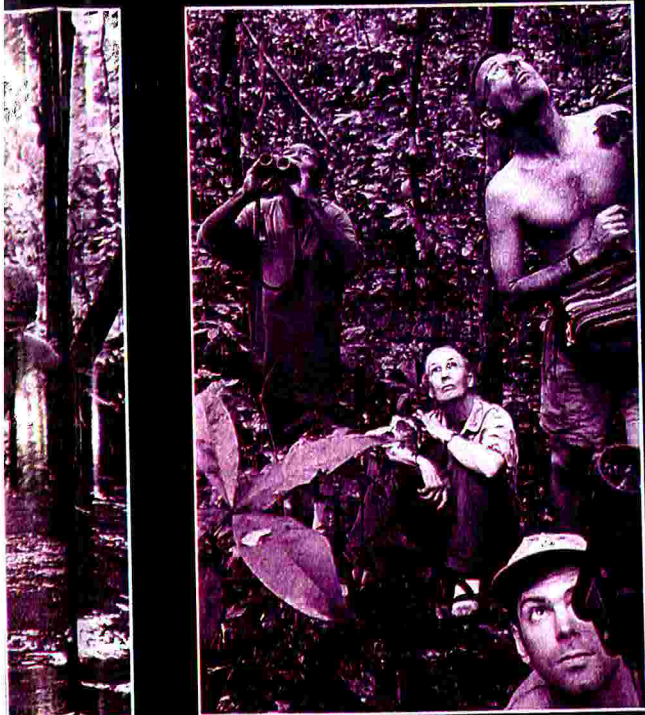
Mike Fay, Michael Nichols and the Megatransect team hired about twenty porters who had to get across the swamp with cameras, tripods, flashes, waterproof camera-trap boxes, hundreds of freeze-dried meals, and Nichols' parmesan cheese.

Left: Watching the 'naïve' chimpanzees

In front, scientist and conservationist Dave Morgan; behind, left to right, a member of the Megatransect team watches chimpanzees in the foliage overhead with primatologist Jane Goodall and ecologist and expedition leader Mike Fay.

Top left and above: Chimpanzee with young, Congo

Working with Dave Morgan in the Goulougo, the team encountered this curious female chimpanzee with an infant. She feigned that the humans were hurting her, screaming for help from nearby males – but they did not come. After futilely screaming for the males, the female settled down calmly with her baby and encouraged her other two youngsters to come closer and look.



The images and extract in this edition of Portfolio come from *The Last Place on Earth*, a two-volume box set consisting of Michael Nichols' photography and Mike Fay's handwritten *Megatransect Journals* (published in October 2005 in hardback by National Geographic Books, ISBN 0792238818, £80). Net proceeds from sales of the book will fund continuing conservation efforts in Africa through the collaboration of the National Geographic Society and Wildlife Conservation Society.

