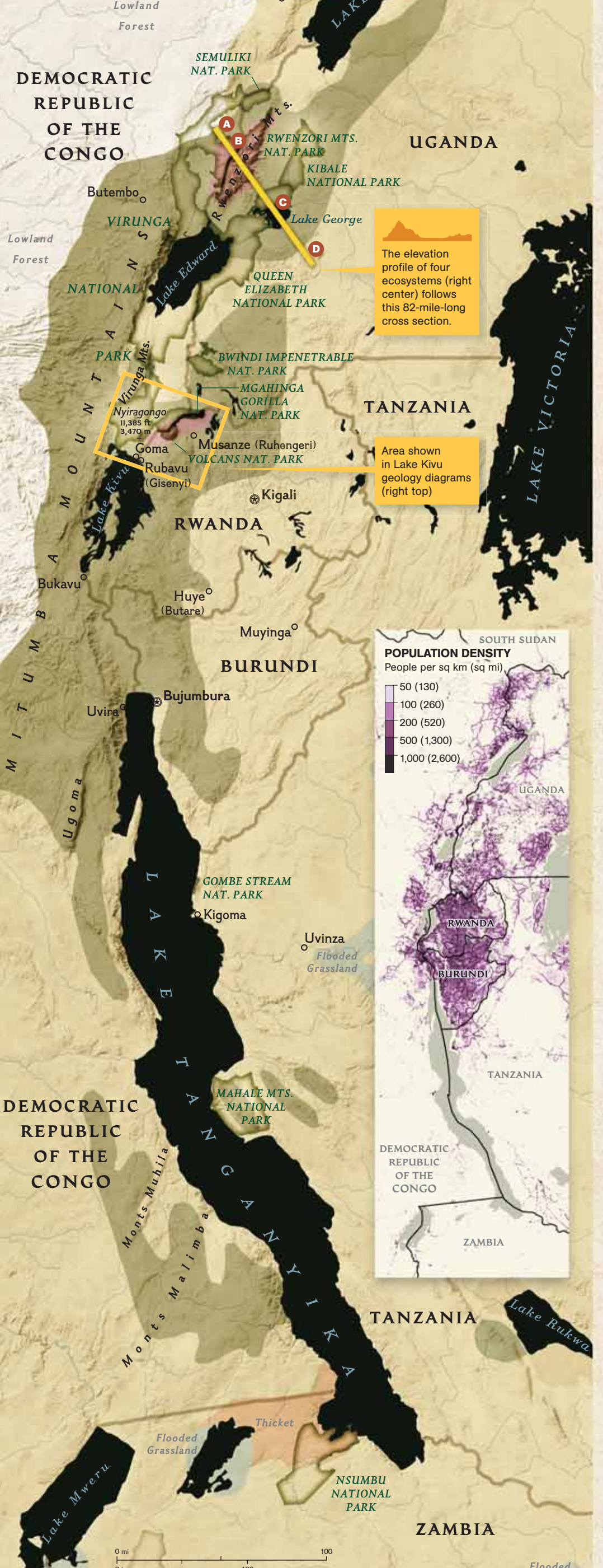


Realms of the Albertine

From Lake Albert through Lake Tanganyika, the 920-mile-long rift holds four ecosystems vital to its biodiversity. With fertile volcanic soil and ample rain, it also supports one of Africa's densest human populations, mainly subsistence farmers. Wildlife conservation here also looks to heal wounds of war. Conflicts over land, resources, and power have killed millions of people in the past two decades.

- ALBERTINE RIFT ECOSYSTEMS**
- Montane forest
 - Alpine moorland
 - Lake and wetland
 - Savanna-forest mosaic



The Great Rift Valley

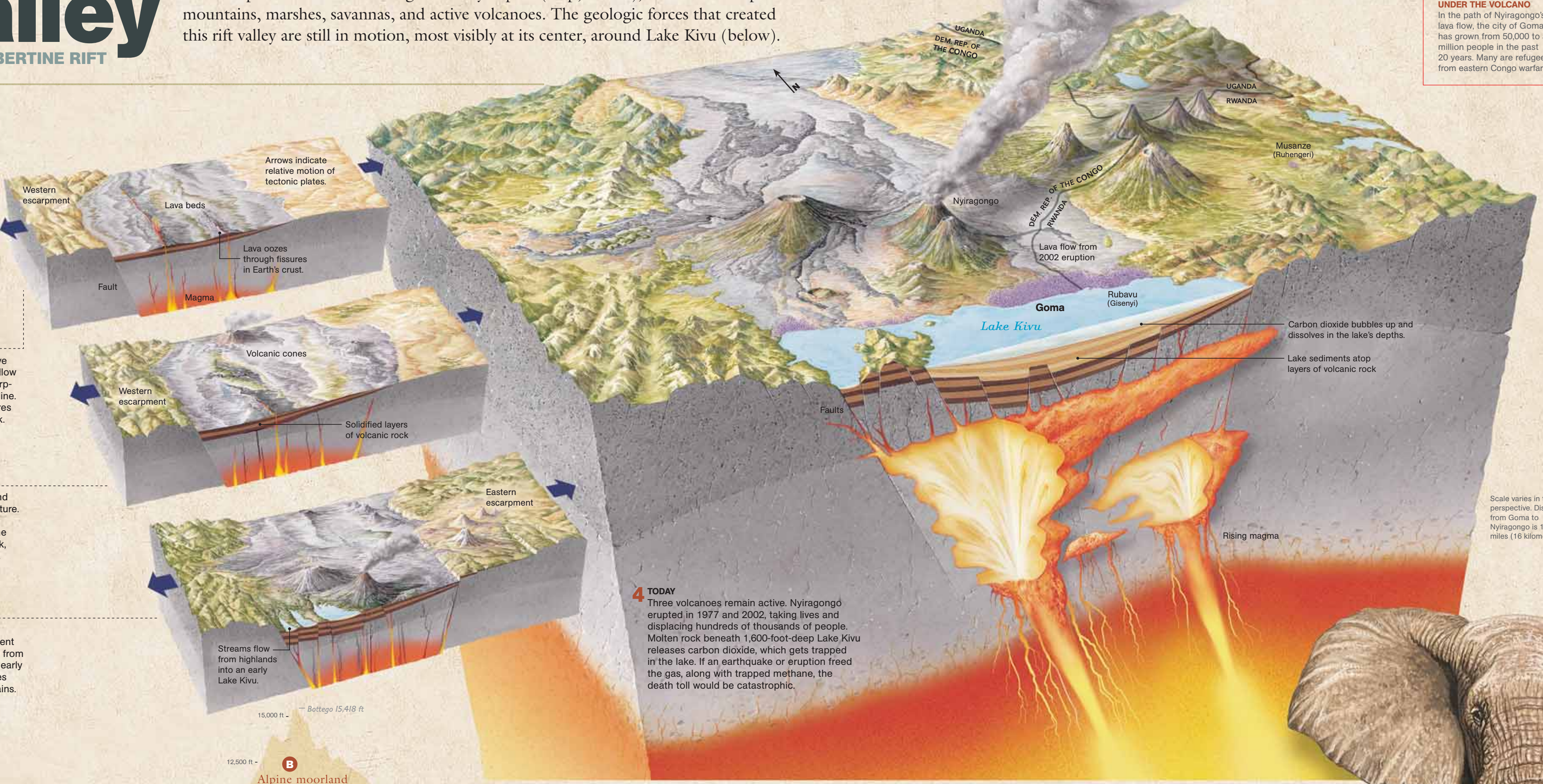
DYNAMICS OF LIFE IN THE ALBERTINE RIFT

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

The western arm of Africa's Great Rift Valley—the Albertine Rift—embraces such rich and varied habitats that its wildlife diversity is unparalleled on the continent. With deep freshwater lakes filling the valley's spine (map, far left), the Albertine spans mountains, marshes, savannas, and active volcanoes. The geologic forces that created this rift valley are still in motion, most visibly at its center, around Lake Kivu (below).

Splitting a Continent

Africa's Great Rift Valley along the edges of tectonic plates that merged more than a billion years ago. Now the plates are separating, or rifting, along those seams. The Arabian plate was the first to split off, starting 30 to 25 million years ago. In another 30 million years, rifting may cleave the Somali plate from the main continent and detach the block called the Tanzania craton.



UNDER THE VOLCANO
In the path of Nyrangongo's lava flow, the city of Goma has grown from 50,000 to a million people in the past 20 years. Many are refugees from eastern Congo warfare.

The Albertine Ark

The Albertine Rift cradles more than 850 species found nowhere else—including the rare mountain gorilla (about 780 remain) and the venomous Great Lakes bush viper. There are familiar faces too: More than 50 percent of the continent's bird species and almost 40 percent of its mammal species live here. The illustrated scenes at bottom highlight four vital Albertine ecosystems.

- SPECIES KEY**
- Endemic (found nowhere else)
 - Threatened or vulnerable
 - Not endemic
 - Threatened or vulnerable
 - Endangered



Total species
8,668

MAMMALS 385
BIRDS 1,074
REPTILES 177
AMPHIBIANS 143
FISH 480
PLANTS 6,409

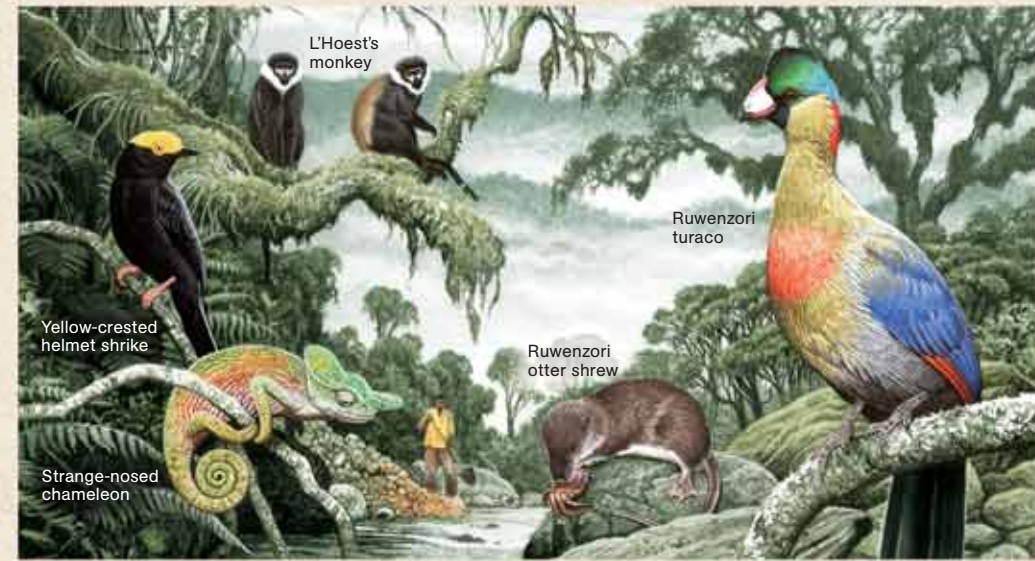
Endemic
854

MAMMALS 45
BIRDS 42
REPTILES 18
AMPHIBIANS 38
FISH 370
PLANTS 341

Threatened
175

MAMMALS 36
BIRDS 25
REPTILES 2
AMPHIBIANS 15
FISH 24
PLANTS 73

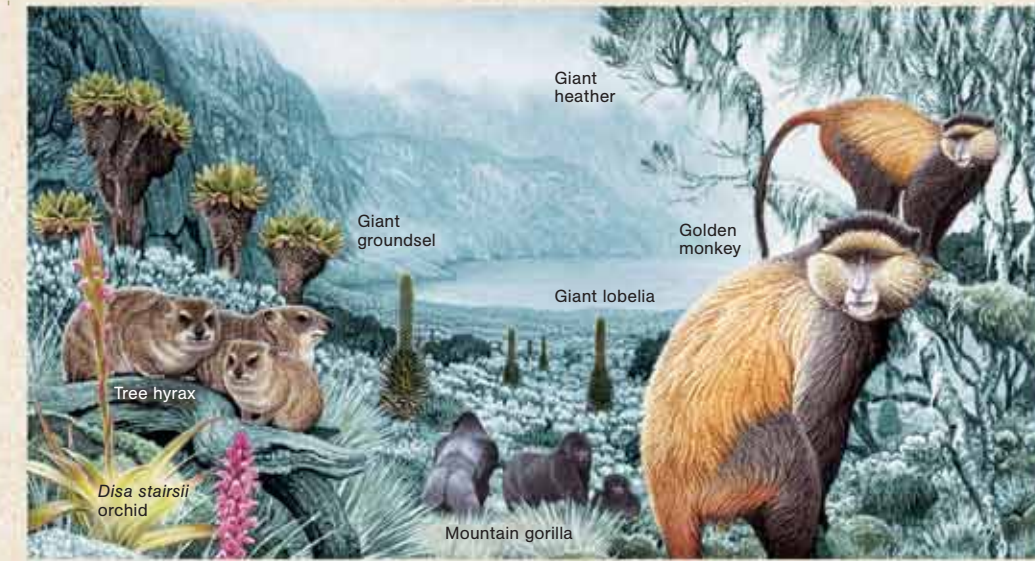
A MONTANE FOREST



Covering the lower slopes of mountains and the highlands flanking the valley, this ecosystem holds the rift's greatest number of endemic species. Flamboyant birds and chameleons and 11 species of monkeys share the forest with the web-toed Ruwenzori otter shrew, about a foot long, which catches crabs and insects in streams.

THREATS Even in protected areas, forests are cleared for farmland and fuel; gold mining is fouling streams.

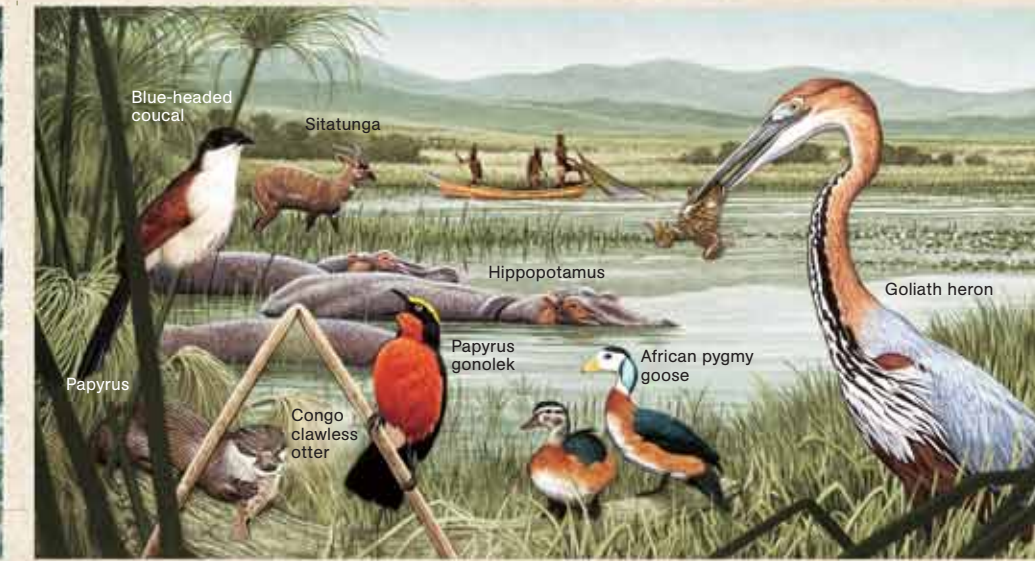
B ALPINE MOORLAND



At altitudes above 10,000 feet, the misty Ruwenzori Mountains and the volcanic Virunga chain shelter otherworldly plants—heathers as tall as trees and towering lobelias. Thick fur warms the tree hyrax, a distant relative of the elephant. Two endangered primates, the mountain gorilla and the golden monkey, survive here.

THREATS The warming temperatures of climate change could shrink this already restricted habitat.

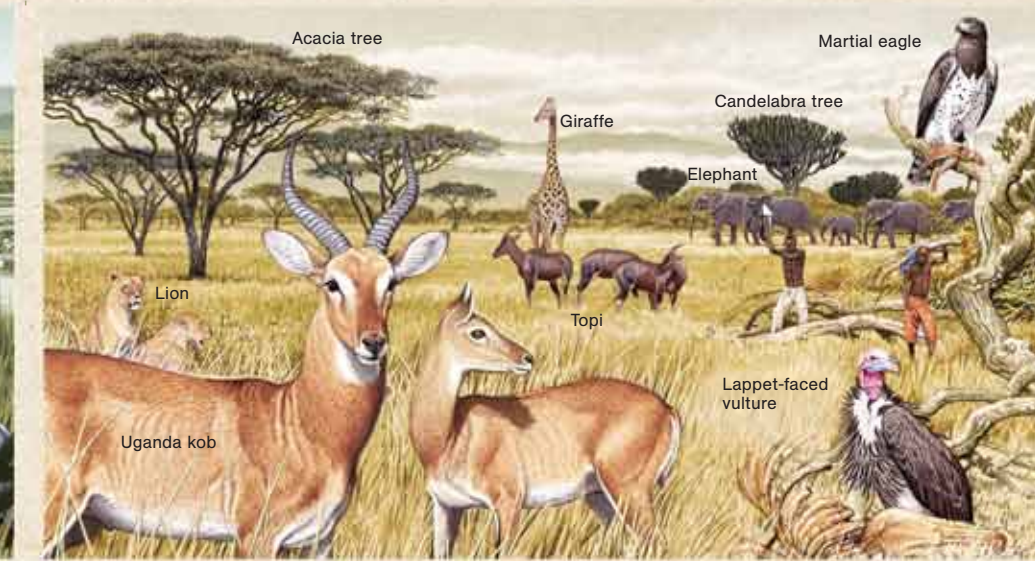
C LAKE AND WETLAND



Papyrus is the sole perch of the red-breasted papyrus gonolek. Along with other wetland vegetation, papyrus forms supportive mats for aquatic antelope called sitatungas. The Congo clawless otter fishes here and also digs for giant earthworms in pockets of swampy forest clearings scattered about the rift.

THREATS Overfishing is taking lake stocks, and wetlands are being drained to expand farmland.

D SAVANNA-FOREST MOSAIC



Two rainy seasons a year bring abundant grass for the savanna's grazing topi and Uganda kob—prey for the top predators, lions, and for scavenging vultures and eagles. As elephants push over trees while feeding on branches and leaves, grassland expands. Natural fires frequently sweep through, priming the savanna for regeneration.

THREATS Trees are cut for charcoal; lions that attack encroaching domestic cattle are killed by farmers.

