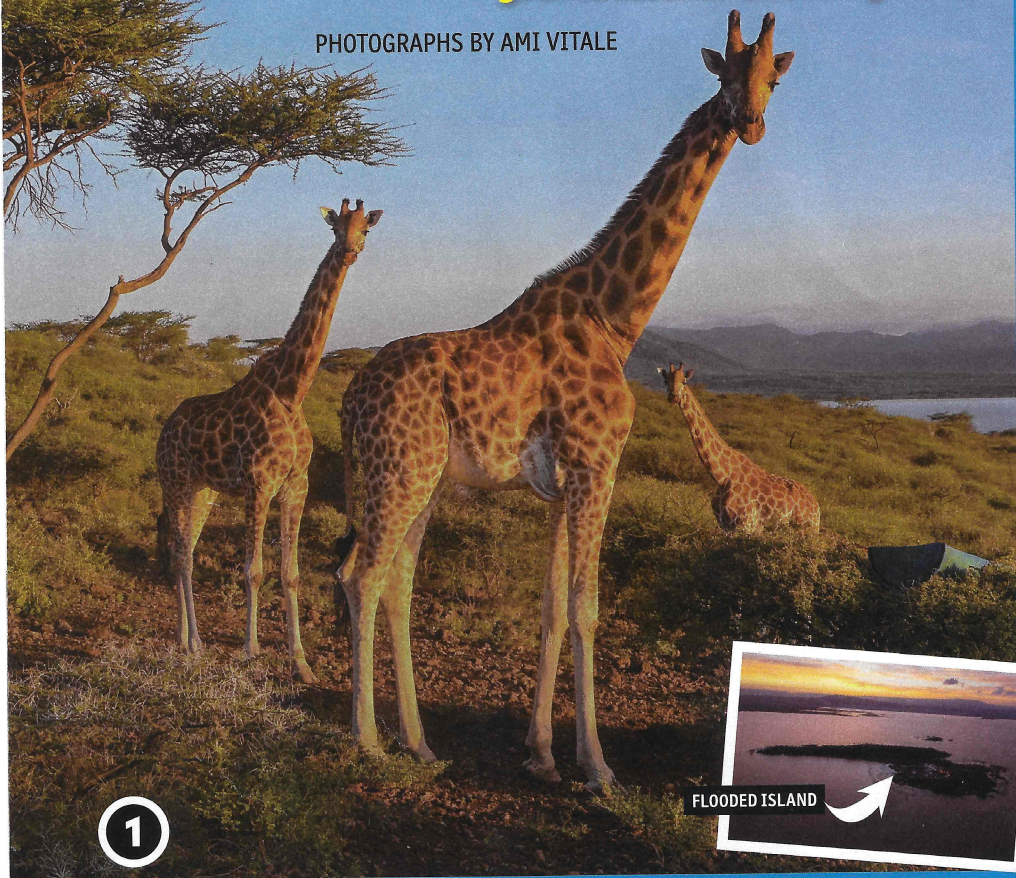


Giraffe on a Raft

How conservationists rescued giraffes stuck on a flooding island

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMI VITALE



1

FLOODED ISLAND

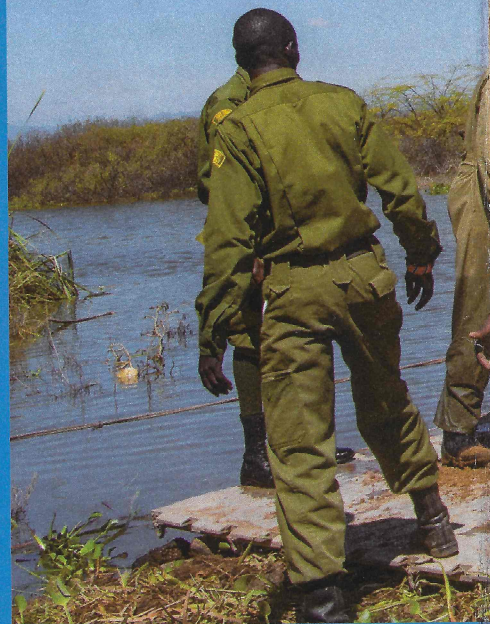


Trapped Eight near-threatened Rothschild's giraffes—a subspecies of northern giraffes—were living on a small island in the middle of a lake in Kenya, a country in East Africa. But heavy rains caused the lake's water level to rise rapidly and flood the island, leaving the giraffes with little land to roam. One female named Asiwa was marooned on a small sliver of land. "Since giraffes can't swim, Asiwa was stuck," says David O'Connor, president of conservation organization Save Giraffes Now. The other giraffes weren't in as much danger. "Asiwa was the most vulnerable, so she was our first priority," he says.

2

Constructing a 'Gir-raft'

Conservationists realized the only way to get Asiwa back to the main-land was by boat—or better yet, a custom-made raft that would be the perfect size to fit a giant animal. Local craftspeople went to work on something tall enough to hold an adult-size giraffe. The solution was a strong steel pen welded to the top of 60 floating barrels.



4

Setting Sail Asiwa had never been on a boat before (obviously!), so the rescuers were worried she might panic and kick during the one-hour trip. But it was smooth sailing. "She was well-behaved during the voyage," O'Connor says. "The sail across the lake was very peaceful."





3

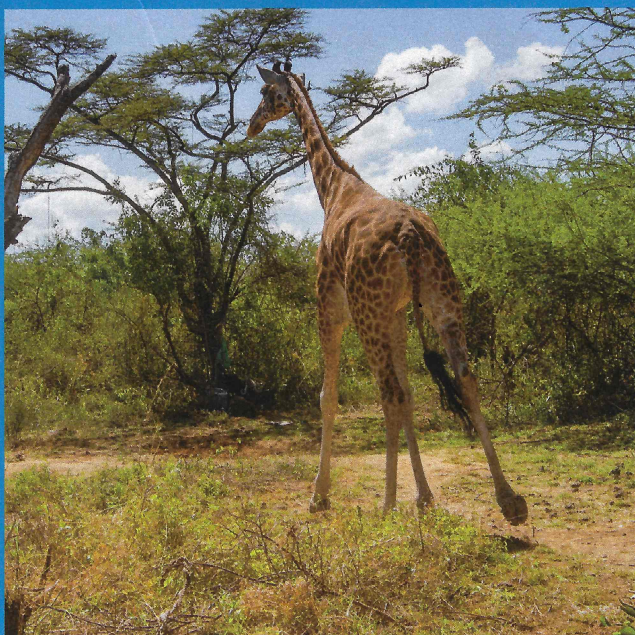
All Aboard

Now the rescue team had to figure out how to convince Asiwa to get on the raft. They came up with a clever idea: delicious mangoes the workers hoped she would follow to the boat like a trail of bread crumbs. But Asiwa didn't follow them very far. "She was still wary of the barge," O'Connor says. So the team sedated the giraffe with a tranquilizer dart, blindfolded her to keep her calm, then guided her with ropes onto the raft. "She walked like a puppy on a leash right onto the barge," O'Connor says.

5

Home Sweet Home

After the raft reached the shore, workers removed Asiwa's blindfold and opened her pen. Then she walked into her new home—the Ruko Community Conservancy, which includes a 4,400-acre giraffe sanctuary. "To go from living on less than one acre to having 4,400 acres to roam is incredible," O'Connor says. "Asiwa's finally safe." More good news: All of her friends from the island have now joined her at the sanctuary.



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