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Wildlife and Fauna of Burkina Faso

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Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Chapter 1: Geography and Climate of Burkina Faso
- Chapter 2: Historical Overview of Biodiversity in Burkina Faso
- Chapter 3: Ecological Zones and Major Habitats
- Chapter 4: Forest Ecosystems and Gallery Forests
- Chapter 5: The Savannas: Sudanian and Sahelian Landscapes
- Chapter 6: Wetlands and Ramsar Sites
- Chapter 7: Mountain and Urban Ecosystems
- Chapter 8: Overview of Mammal Diversity
- Chapter 9: Elephants and Large Herbivores
- Chapter 10: Predators: Lions, Leopards, Cheetahs, and Wild Dogs
- Chapter 11: Primates and Other Notable Mammal Species
- Chapter 12: Avian Biodiversity: Birds of Burkina Faso
- Chapter 13: Migratory Birds and Important Bird Areas
- Chapter 14: Reptiles and Amphibians: Crocodiles, Snakes, and Lizards
- Chapter 15: Aquatic Life: Fish and Other Freshwater Species
- Chapter 16: The Insect World: Diversity and Ecological Roles
- Chapter 17: Flora of Burkina Faso: Grasses, Legumes, and Endemic Species
- Chapter 18: The Shea Tree, Baobab, and Economically Significant Plants
- Chapter 19: Endangered and Threatened Species
- Chapter 20: Conservation Efforts: Protected Areas and National Parks
- Chapter 21: Key National Parks and Wildlife Reserves
- Chapter 22: Community Involvement and Traditional Knowledge
- Chapter 23: Threats to Biodiversity: Deforestation, Drought, and Poaching
- Chapter 24: Strategies for Sustainable Management and Future Challenges
- Chapter 25: The Importance of Biodiversity for Burkina Faso's Future

Introduction

Burkina Faso, nestled in the heart of West Africa, stands as a vibrant testament to the region's biological richness and ecological diversity. Despite being landlocked and spanning primarily savanna amid a tropical climate, the country supports an impressive array of wildlife and plant life. From sprawling grasslands and forests to lush wetlands and iconic natural landmarks, Burkina Faso's landscapes harbor countless species—each contributing to the delicate balance of its ecosystems. This book celebrates and examines the incredible tapestry of life that calls Burkina Faso home, offering a comprehensive guide to its wildlife, habitats, and the critical conservation efforts underway.

The extraordinary range of habitats present in Burkina Faso—from the arid Sahelian savannas of the north to the more verdant Sudanian savannas and forests of the south—provides sanctuary for mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and insects. Unique sites such as the Mare aux Hippopotames, the Oursi Pond, and the dramatic cliffs of the Pics de Sindou exemplify the country's natural beauty and ecological importance. Protected areas and national parks not only serve as havens for endangered species but also play a pivotal role in global biodiversity preservation, connecting Burkina Faso's natural riches to the broader conservation landscape of West Africa.

Biodiversity in Burkina Faso encompasses both the iconic and the lesser-known. The country holds some of West Africa's largest populations of elephants and endangered mammals like lions, cheetahs, and African wild dogs. Its skies and wetlands attract hundreds of bird species, including significant migratory populations and globally threatened avian species. Underfoot, a vibrant world of unique reptiles, amphibians, fish, and thousands of insect species sustains intricate food webs and ecological processes. The flora of Burkina Faso—the resilient shea tree, majestic baobabs, endemic grasses, and vital aquatic plants—anchors both human and wildlife communities in the face of environmental change.

Yet, this rich natural heritage is not without peril. Burkina Faso's ecosystems face mounting threats from deforestation, recurrent droughts, unsustainable agriculture, bush fires, habitat fragmentation, and poaching. These pressures are particularly acute as climate change intensifies and the nation's growing population places ever-increasing demands on land and water resources. Key species teeter on the brink of extinction, and the loss of habitats risks impoverishing not just the natural world, but the livelihoods and cultures intricately tied to it.

Against these challenges, the people and government of Burkina Faso have embarked

on significant conservation efforts. National parks, reserves, and Ramsar wetlands, in combination with national biodiversity strategies, form the cornerstone of these actions. Yet, protecting wildlife cannot occur in isolation; it requires the collaboration of local communities, the integration of traditional ecological knowledge, and a commitment to sustainable development that honors both human and non-human life.

This guide is both an exploration and a call to action. As you journey through its chapters, you will encounter the rich mosaic of Burkina Faso's wildlife and flora, gain insights into the country's geography and habitats, and discover the stories of the remarkable species that dwell here. But you will also come face to face with the stark realities of environmental threat—and the urgent need for stewardship. Understanding and conserving the wildlife and fauna of Burkina Faso is not merely a scientific or ecological pursuit, but an investment in the wellbeing and resilience of the nation and its people for generations to come.

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CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Climate of Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, a landlocked nation situated squarely in the western part of Africa, finds itself nestled between the vast Sahara Desert to its north and the coastal states bordering the Gulf of Guinea to its south. This pivotal position shapes much of its environmental character. The country shares extensive borders with six neighboring nations: Mali lies to its north and west, Niger to the east, and to the south lie Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire. With a total area covering approximately 274,200 square kilometers, Burkina Faso is a sizeable piece of the West African landscape, comparable in land area to a place like the state of Colorado in the United States, or slightly larger than New Zealand.

The terrain of Burkina Faso is predominantly flat, characterized largely by an expansive peneplain. This isn't a perfectly flat, featureless plain, but rather a gently undulating landscape, a result of extensive erosion over geological time. Scattered across this vast peneplain are occasional isolated hills, which stand as the final remnants of ancient Precambrian rock formations that have resisted the relentless forces of weathering and time. This undulating plain covers the majority of the country, presenting a consistent, if subtly varied, backdrop for much of the nation's life, both human and wild.

While the peneplain defines much of the landscape, the southwestern part of Burkina Faso offers a dramatic contrast. Here, the topography shifts to a sandstone massif. This region is marked by rugged terrain, notable rocky outcrops, gorges, and steep cliffs that can rise sharply, sometimes up to 150 meters high. This geological difference in the southwest creates distinct visual and ecological conditions compared to the gentler plains that dominate elsewhere.

Within this southwestern sandstone massif lies the highest point in Burkina Faso, Mount Ténakourou. This peak reaches an elevation of approximately 749 meters (or about 2,457 feet) above sea level. While not towering mountains on a global scale, Ténakourou and the surrounding elevated areas represent the country's greatest relief and contribute to localized variations in climate and habitat. The average altitude across Burkina Faso is significantly lower, sitting at around 400 meters (or 1,300 feet), underscoring the generally flat nature of the country.

Burkina Faso's river systems are central to its geography, and indeed, the nation owes its former name, Upper Volta, to three major rivers that flow through it: the Black Volta (also known as the Mouhoun), the White Volta (the Nakambé), and the Red Volta (the

Nazinon). These three rivers originate within Burkina Faso and converge to the south in Ghana, where they form the Volta River before flowing into the Gulf of Guinea.

In addition to the Volta tributaries, other river systems influence the country's landscape and provide vital water resources. The Komoé River flows through the southwest part of the country, and along with the Black Volta, it is one of the few rivers in Burkina Faso that maintains a flow year-round. The basin of the Niger River also extends into Burkina Faso, draining about 27% of the country's surface area, particularly in the northeast.

However, the flow of most rivers in Burkina Faso is subject to significant seasonal variation. During the long dry season, many waterways diminish to mere trickles or even become dry beds. This natural rhythm of flooding and recession profoundly impacts the ecosystems along the riverbanks and floodplains, creating dynamic environments that support specific types of flora and fauna adapted to these changing conditions. The availability of water, or lack thereof, is a critical geographical factor shaping life across the country.

Beyond the rivers, Burkina Faso features several notable natural water bodies and geological formations. Wetlands like the Mare aux Hippopotames and the Oursi Pond are recognized as Ramsar sites, highlighting their international importance, particularly for waterfowl. While Lakes Bam and Oursi are significant, they, like the rivers, can shrink considerably during the dry season, with Oursi sometimes drying up entirely.

The southwest region, with its sandstone massif, also boasts dramatic natural landmarks like the Pics de Sindou and the Cascades de Karfiguela. The Pics de Sindou are striking, eroded sandstone formations, often described as needles or peaks, rising dramatically from the surrounding terrain. These sculptural rocks are a testament to the power of natural erosion over vast periods.

Not far from the Pics de Sindou are the Cascades de Karfiguela, a series of picturesque waterfalls along the Komoé River near the town of Banfora. These cascades tumble over the rocky landscape, creating natural pools at their base and providing a lush, watery environment that contrasts with the drier surroundings, especially during and just after the rainy season when the water flow is at its peak.

Burkina Faso's climate is primarily tropical, characterized by two distinct seasons: a rainy season and a long, pronounced dry season. The country's position in West Africa, influenced by the movement of the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ), dictates the timing and intensity of rainfall. This leads to significant variation in precipitation from the south to the north.

Generally, the rainy season extends from May or June to September. The duration of

this wet period is shorter in the northern parts of the country and progressively longer as one moves south. While the rainy season brings much-needed water, the dry season is considerably longer and dominates the climate for the rest of the year.

The dry season is heavily influenced by the Harmattan, a hot, dry, and often dust-laden wind that blows from the Sahara Desert to the northeast. This wind typically prevails from around October or November through March or April, bringing arid conditions and significantly lower humidity across the country. The Harmattan can create hazy conditions and contributes to the intense dryness experienced during this period.

Temperature-wise, Burkina Faso is a hot country. Average annual temperatures range between 25°C and 32°C. However, there are significant variations throughout the year and across different regions. The cooler months are typically December and January, with monthly minimum temperatures averaging around 17°C. The hottest period occurs between March and April, just before the onset of the rainy season, when maximum temperatures can soar to 40°C or even higher in some areas.

The country is broadly divided into three main climatic zones, transitioning from north to south: the Sahelian zone, the Sudano-Sahelian zone, and the Sudanian (or Sudano-Guinean) zone. Each zone has distinct characteristics shaped primarily by the amount and duration of rainfall it receives.

The Sahelian zone is the northernmost region, bordering the Sahara. It is the driest part of the country, experiencing a hot semi-arid climate. Rainfall here is scarce and erratic, typically receiving less than 600 millimeters per year. The dry season in the Sahelian zone is prolonged, often lasting more than nine months. Temperatures in this zone can fluctuate dramatically, with daytime highs reaching around 45°C during the dry season and dropping to around 15°C at night. This harsh environment supports sparse vegetation adapted to drought.

South of the Sahelian zone is the Sudano-Sahelian region, which acts as a transitional belt. This zone occupies a large portion of the country, primarily centered around the savanna plateau. It receives more rainfall than the Sahel, with annual precipitation generally ranging between 600 and 900 millimeters. The rainy season is longer here compared to the Sahel, and the dry season is shorter, typically not exceeding eight months. Temperatures in the Sudano-Sahelian zone are slightly cooler on average than in the Sahel, though still very hot, particularly during the dry season, with temperatures around 48°C possible before the rains arrive.

The southernmost region is the Sudanian, also sometimes referred to as the Sudano-Guinean zone. This is the most humid part of Burkina Faso, characterized by a tropical wet-dry climate with the highest annual rainfall, usually exceeding 900 millimeters and sometimes reaching up to 1200 millimeters per year in the southwest. The rainy

season is the longest in this zone, lasting up to six months. Average temperatures are generally cooler than in the northern zones, especially during the rainy season. During the dry season, temperatures might range from around 28°C at night to 41°C during the day. This zone supports denser vegetation, including forests and woodlands, due to the more favorable moisture conditions.

The distinct wet and dry seasons, coupled with the north-to-south gradient in rainfall and temperature, create a mosaic of environmental conditions across Burkina Faso. This geographical and climatic variability is the fundamental basis for the diverse ecosystems and habitats found within the country, directly influencing the distribution and types of wildlife that can survive and thrive in each region. The challenges posed by this climate, such as recurrent droughts and the increasing impacts of climate change, also play a significant role in shaping the natural landscape and the lives of its inhabitants, both human and animal.

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