

BIG GAME IN RHODESIA

BY WYNANT DAVIS HUBBARD

I have just completed reading the able and vivid paper on the "Close of the Age of Mammals," by Osborn and Anthony, in the November, 1922, issue of the Journal of Mammalogy. Being at present engaged in the capturing alive of Rhodesian animals for zoological gardens, I have a peculiar interest in the discussion of the disappearance of certain African forms of wild life.

Mr. Herbert Lang is quoted as stating that the mountain zebra, bontebok, square-mouthed rhinoceros, okapi, black wildebeeste, kudu, and the Addo bush elephant are on the verge of extinction. The bontebok, okapi, black wildebeeste, and the elephant of the Addo bush I know nothing about from personal observation. The white rhinoceros, kudu, and the mountain zebra I do know, having just returned from a safari into the country in which these animals may still be found. With Mr. Lang's statement regarding the kudu I do not wholly agree unless it is meant to apply to the country south of the Zambesi River. Only two days ago while out hunting I saw four kudus and the tracks of at least fifty more. On my safari my companion shot kudus and they were, with the possible exception of sables, buffaloes, and zebras, the most plentiful of the large animals. Our trip was made at a very poor time of year, but in the two weeks we saw the spoor for at least one thousand kudus. Continued conversations and enquiries among the natives lead me to the conclusion that in this part of Rhodesia the kudu is, if not the second most plentiful large buck, certainly the third. The sable leads in numbers, and the roan may possibly come second.

From the information that I have at hand at present I should put the numbers of large buck in the following order: 1. sable; 2. kudu; 3. roan; 4. Lichtenstein hartebeeste; then, eland, blue wildebeeste, lechwe, impalla, puku, and bushbuck. The situtunga, waterbuck, and sessaby are scarce, the waterbuck being the most plentiful of the three. The impalla, puku, bushbuck, and lechwe are localized, found in large herds in some places and absolutely wanting in others.

Zebras are plentiful in certain types of country. In the foothills of the mountains of the Zambesi Valley escarpment near here there are large and numerous herds of the northern mountain zebra and on certain "flats" or large stretches of open country there are herds of a different zebra, presumably Burchell's, or *Hippotigris burchelli*. This variety has been split up into so many sub-varieties that it is nearly impossible

to say which sub-variety occurs here. Mr. Lang refers, I think, to *Hippotigris zebra* when he mentions the mountain zebra. This variety is on the verge of extinction, being limited to a few places in the mountainous regions of the Cape Colony. *Hippotigris crawshayi* is, on the other hand, not limited to a few places here, but is found rather widely distributed.

I hesitate to discuss the square-mouthed rhinoceros. It is difficult in the extreme to estimate or attempt to estimate the numbers of this animal. That there are quite a few at present living not far from here I know. Just how many there are it is impossible to say. In comparison with the black rhinoceros the white is not uncommon in certain places. In others, however, it is totally lacking.

The plea for game protection in Northern and also Southern Rhodesia will and does, I am afraid, meet with great and determined opposition. There are to my mind three main reasons for this; the lack of an adequate and constant supply of palatable fresh meat, the prices paid for hides and skins, and the lack of educated or thoughtful men on the farms. To elaborate on these reasons: The supply of meat which is necessary to any family is, in this tropical country, a vital and very difficult problem. Beef, mutton, lamb, pork, and veal as we in America know them, do not exist. Sheep tastes like goat, the beef is poor and tough, I have never seen veal, and pork is very scarce. Practically all of the farms are supposedly self-sufficient as regards food but the real situation, at least here, is that the farmers are so poor they do not dare to kill what pigs and cattle they may have; practically none have sheep, and, as a consequence, they depend for their meat supply on the game. What is the result? Ammunition is expensive and time is precious so hunting is confined largely or at least preferably to large bucks. The skin value of a sable, eland, or roan is also an attraction. Therefore large bucks are killed without a thought to the inevitable fact that at least two-thirds of the meat will go bad before it can be eaten. It is then either thrown to the dogs or pigs or sold to the natives, no one of the three needing meat.

Three days ago one of my neighbors shot in one day one large eland, one roan, and one hartebeeste. He was far from home at the time with the result that the greater part of all this meat was too rotten to eat before it reached the farm. These three splendid animals were killed not primarily for the meat, but for the small value of the skins, and because, as the shooter himself told me, the love of shooting (killing, I called it) was too great, and everything that was seen had to be shot at.

War was declared a few years ago on the sale of heads, skins, and plumes from game and other wild mammals and birds in the United States and Canada. In Rhodesia no hinderance is put upon it. All the small and large traders buy the skins and hides of the sable, roan, hartebeeste, wildebeeste, kudu, eland, buffalo, rhinoceros, and hippopotamus. Not much is paid for individual skins, usually not more than ten shillings, but for a man who shoots as recklessly as my neighbor the sum total of money received for skins amounts to quite a respectable sum for the entire year.

Another reason for the selection of large bucks for killing is the fact that practically no rope is to be found in use in this country. Buck skins are used for every conceivable purpose. All the thongs, whips, and straps necessary for the many spans of oxen are cut chiefly from the skins of bucks, which also go to the making of buckets, mixing-bins for cement, and shoes, the tying of grass on the house roofs, and any odd use to which they can be put in an emergency. As a consequence, on all the farms that I have visited, moldy half-skins of the sable, eland, roan, etc., are to be seen lying around useless for any real purpose. There is also a big demand for the heads of the rarer game species. This, of course, encourages their pursuit; whereas, for the purposes of meat or skins, any of the commoner species would do as well.

There is in Rhodesia, indeed in the whole of South Africa, a certain class that wages a continuous and ruthless war on game of all kinds. Farming is used by them as more or less of a pretext to cover the excessive amount of hunting which they do. I should judge, from what I have seen, that if their hunting were stopped or at least limited to what the law allows they would soon be bankrupt and foodless.

With the majority of the inhabitants so illiterate and thoughtless, it is difficult to see how to plan for protective game legislation and education. An extremely strict enforcement of the game laws and the infliction of the maximum penalties for the violation of the same would have some effect. But the sum total of Northern Rhodesia police force is only some seventeen men. It is not too late yet to save most of the species here, but forceful action of some kind must be inaugurated speedily or the chance will have passed.

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