

The Living Air

THE MEMOIRS OF AN
ORNITHOLOGIST

by

JEAN DELACOUR



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Jean Delacour and his mother (then aged 90) at New York. 1950.

beheld alive. There were two Reinhart's argus, three Edwards' pheasants and another bird, also blue, but larger and lacking the small white crest, which evidently belonged to a species so far unknown. I noticed immediately a number of other rarities, alive or dead. It was altogether exciting and promising.

Outside the Residency grounds stood other government buildings, the Catholic mission, pagodas, schools, stores and modern houses, all built in shady gardens along tree-lined avenues. The chief town of a province always includes a castle, usually built during the 18th century with the help of French engineers. The one here was most attractive with wide moats, full of pink lotuses and blue water-hyacinths, heavy brick walls and oriental gates. Inside, avenues and gardens, with clipped hedges and trees, some in the shape of the sacred tortoise, dragon, crane or phoenix, and low, tiled walls, were purely Annamite in design. Pylons, balustrades, pagodas, gates and roofs were all decorated with fabulous animals and other ornaments in ceramics. The woodwork was particularly fine, the hard, dark beams being delicately carved. There was a good deal of gold and red lacquer in the more elaborate halls. In Annam, where the light is subdued, the climate moist and warm and the vegetation lush, everything has a soft, languid charm that does not quite exist in other countries.

I spent the winter and spring in the Quangtri province, except for a few trips to Hué, Tourane and Hanoi, and a visit to the Angkor ruins in Cambodia. Part of the time we remained at the Residency and went round by car collecting in the neighbourhood. I used to go into the garden at 6 o'clock in the morning to look at the birds and attend to the more delicate ones. As I wore no socks, I was often bitten on the feet by large, savage red ants which lived in the trees in pear-shaped nests made of dead leaves stuck together. Those fiends considered me as an unwelcome intruder into their hunting-grounds at such an early hour, and it was amusing to watch them coming down from quite a long distance to attack me.

Birds were numerous in the low country, some with bright plumage, such as rollers, bee-eaters and kingfishers, being conspicuous along the roads as they perched on the telephone wires. Birds of prey were common, particularly kites and harriers during winter. The graceful flight of the harriers over the flooded paddy-fields was a common sight. By chance we discovered the spot where many of them gathered to sleep at night. It was along the coast, in a slightly marshy depression in the white sand dunes. At nightfall, one by one, hundreds of these birds would come and

settle noiselessly on the ground to sleep; there were oriental marsh-harriers and a beautiful species, the pied harrier. We often went to watch the gathering before dinner. Many of the birds must have come from great distances to spend the night there.

The coastal plain is wide in the Quangtri region, and there is a fairly low gap in the mountains; it provides, in fact, the easiest passage into Laos along the whole chain, hardly more than 1,000 feet high. The sandy stretches and marshes along the shore, the paddy-fields, the bamboo hedges and gardens of the villages, the sacred groves of the pagodas, and, farther inland, the scrubby bush and the hilly country to the west provided varied hunting-grounds.

The hills start about thirty miles from the coast, first low and grassy, but soon rising to 3,000 feet or more. They have precipitous cliffs, sharp rocks, forested tops and narrow valleys. We spent several weeks in the highlands on the road to Laos on three occasions. A great deal of the forest had already been cleared near the highway, but some good patches remained a short distance away. This was the country for rarities, the haunt of argus pheasants and many other unusual birds. Majestic green peacocks were common; one day at dawn we watched over forty feeding in a bare field across the river: a marvellous sight. Tigers and leopards were numerous, as well as deer, wild boar and wild cattle (gaur). There were also some elephants. We even came across, at night, a two-horned rhino (*R. sumatrensis*), an almost extinct beast. One sees all sorts of animals when driving in the dark along newly opened roads; it is often the only chance of finding nocturnal creatures that never leave the shelter of the bush or burrow during the day.

We stayed first at Laobao, a small military post and local prison settlement on the western side of the pass, where the climate is already Laotian, entirely different from that of the eastern slope. The sharp changes of weather along the chain are positively astonishing. During the winter the Annamitic slopes are hopelessly wet, as it rains almost continuously. The vegetation is marvellously fresh, and dead leaves decompose and disappear so quickly that the whole forest resembles a tidy garden. Tree-ferns, as well as epiphytic plants, have delicate, often translucent fronds and leaves; on mossy boulders in the shade grow lovely dwarf orchids, whose leaves of dark purple are delicately veined with scarlet or gold, their slender spikes of wax-like white blossoms standing above.

Unfortunately fearful land leeches abound. These abominable pests

an old-fashioned colonial administration. There were comparatively few white officials and settlers. At the time of my first visit some of them remained that were typical of an earlier period. There were provincial residents who had retained the same post for several decades and who had Laotian wives and families. They loved the people and ruled them in a paternal, but sometimes tyrannical way, which, after all, was probably better suited to their mentality than any other method. They were extremely picturesque characters, queer but lovable.

In 1925 I explored with Jabouille and Lowe the province of Xieng-Khouang, in Upper Laos, formed by the vast Tranninh plateau, which lies at an altitude of 4,000 to 5,000 feet, and is cut by several peaks and ridges reaching 10,000 feet. It is covered with high grass, pines, oaks and chestnuts, and many parts have quite a northern appearance, but the mountain slopes are covered with tropical forests, where orchids, ferns and gingers grow profusely.

On the way from Annam to Xieng-Khouang we followed a deep, narrow valley, then ascended steep slopes up to 6,000 feet, finding ourselves in the heart of the Meo country. The scenery was striking, but the climate bleak and often gloomy, with low clouds driven by high winds. The little post of Nonghet, in a hollow, was a Meo centre where the inhabitants grew opium poppies in narrow valleys. I well remember a nearby village, which I visited again thirteen years later; it was the seat of a local chief, and, situated in a wide alpine meadow, windswept and chilly; it consisted of widely scattered, substantial houses made of thick board. The water of a nearby stream was brought in bamboo pipes, and opium poppies were grown all around. The village was rich, with plenty of cattle, pigs, goats and poultry. The inhabitants, active and independent, took little notice of us; they were friendly, but had no time to waste.

We had heard that an important old lady, the widow of the late chief, had the head of a rare two-horned rhinoceros, a beast now perhaps extinct in Indo-China, which had been taken in the neighbourhood fifteen or twenty years before – the last of a species formerly common in the area, from which the name of Nonghet (the hole of the rhino) had been derived. We went to see her, and we explained that we wanted to see and to photograph her rhino horns. She graciously brought the head out of a case so that we could examine it at leisure. Sure enough, it was a fine skull, with the biggest double horn I have ever seen in the species. We talked through an interpreter and finally inquired whether she would

consider selling the skull. The answer was quick and decisive: she knew it was very rare and valuable and that she could get much money for it, but she happened to fancy it and she was going to keep it because it was her pleasure. No offer of money, however large, could tempt her. It was no use insisting.

I went to Xieng-Khouang again in 1938 with Greenway and Edmond-Blanc, and we collected with David-Beaulieu, who had been there for several years as the local Resident. David-Beaulieu, a tall, strong, silent man and an excellent administrator who understood and liked the more primitive peoples of the mountains, was a born naturalist whom no hardships could stop when it came to collecting rare specimens; a fine type of colonial administrator and of field naturalist, and the most unselfish and hospitable friend.

Among all the animals that occur round Xieng-Khouang, gibbons were conspicuous by their numbers. The smallest and by far the most attractive of the four man-like apes, gibbons inhabit south-east Asia and Malaysia. There are several species of them, and the most handsome is in Indo-China. Gibbons live in trees, seldom coming to the ground, and they swing from one branch to another on their long arms with extraordinary ease and grace. I had watched some before, both captive and wild, but this was the first time I realised that these apes could be kept as pets at liberty, for their diet of leaves and fruit makes them harmless to other creatures. I will, therefore, tell now the whole story of the gibbons that lived and flourished at Clères for many years, free in the park in winter and summer – an experiment never tried before.

It was quite by accident that gibbons reached Clères, as I had never wished to possess any, being under the impression that they had to be caged. I had seen gibbons kept as pets in Indo-China, and found them amusing, but it never occurred to me that they could stand the northern French winters outdoors, and not prove a nuisance to men, beasts and plants. I met at Xieng-Khouang Dr and Mrs G. Lemoine in 1925. My first visit to their house convinced me that they were indeed ape-crazy. Still young, but childless, they had no fewer than eighteen gibbons, all of them free. On almost every chair in the house and in every tree in the garden was one or more small black ape, nearly all still immature. They had names, and their owners knew the history of every one of them, and its particular mind and temper. Reports of their many achievements never ended.

I took a strong liking to these charming little animals, so nearly human,