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THE LOW-VELD: ITS WILD LIFE AND ITS PEOPLE

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WITH FOREWORD BY
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THE LOW-VELD
(Photo by M. Dent)

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CHAPTER V

MAMMALS

Game in early days—Process of destruction—Game "drives" and traps—Rinderpest—Tsetse fly—Effects of South African War upon the game—Conditions after peace—Present position of the fauna—Indigenous species—Diseases—Calculation of numbers

A FORESTED country, all else being equal, is incapable of sustaining, mile for mile, as many of the larger herbivorous mammals as one bare of trees. There is less grazing ground to the acre, and, where trees grow thickly, pasture is apt to be proportionately scarce. Therefore, at its best, though it may have excelled in variety of species, the Low-Veld probably never attained, in the numerical abundance of its wild life, to the level of the plateau country during the latter's palmy days. Nevertheless, being then undoubtedly better watered than now, it must, about the middle of the nineteenth century, have veritably teemed with wild animals. Even at an earlier period, before inter-tribal wars had nearly exterminated the native population, game must have existed in immense numbers, for the hunting activities of each clan were strictly confined to within its own boundaries, and fire-arms were only found in the hands of occasional native and coloured ivory hunters from the High-Veld and the coast.

During the era of unrest, and in the years immediately following, these native hunters, usually in the employ of European traders, so largely increased in numbers that before the appearance to any extent of white men in the Low-Veld, the elephant had been exterminated or driven from the southern parts of the country, and, throughout all the area south of the Olifants River, lingered only here and there among the Lebombo Hills. The white rhinoceros seems to have disappeared about the same time, and it appears probable that the

final extinction of both species was due to the activities of Albassini's well-armed native hunters,¹ who through the course of many years made ivory and hide hunting their sole business.

From the early 'seventies onwards, the game gradually receded more and more to the east, until, by 1899, south of the Pretoria-Delagoa Bay Railway, and west of the Selati line, the larger types had practically been exterminated, and elsewhere were confined to a comparatively narrow strip abutting on the Portuguese Border. When, about 1873, Mr. W. Sanderson first saw the country south of the Olifants River, elands abounded in the Middle-Veld near to the present White River settlement, while the whole area comprising the foothills and the country east of them, was abundantly stocked with all the indigenous species of antelopes. Giraffe, buffalo and black rhinoceros were found in great numbers throughout the Low-Veld proper, and owing to the almost complete absence of native inhabitants, game generally was on the increase.

Thenceforward there came a change. Colonel E. G. Pennefather, formerly of the Inniskilling Dragoons, told the writer that when, in 1880, he accompanied the late Mr. Glynn on one of the latter's annual hunting trips, the larger animals had already become rather scarce in the western areas, and that wagons heavily loaded with biltong and giraffe hides were constantly met trekking homewards. Doubtless but for the presence of tsetse fly over a large portion of the eastern Low-Veld, all the larger animals would have been shot out within twenty years of the first appearance of the white hunters. As it was, the latter were prevented from taking their transport wagons and horses into many parts of the country, which had therefore to be hunted on foot, a method not at all popular with the Boer hunter of those days. Mr. Sanderson and his two brothers used to go into the fly belts with donkey wagons, placing the certain loss of the animals against the profit they expected to make out of hides and biltong. Usually they were out of pocket as the result of the venture, and so endeavoured each year to increase their bag in the hope of turning the scale. Undoubtedly up to 1892 the game within the fly belts suffered far

¹ See page 175.

less than that outside, and mainly at the hands of natives, who by then possessed a good many fire-arms—albeit of antiquated makes. The Selati Railway construction in 1893 brought a new type of hunter on the scene, in the person of the townsman, who would come up the line on a trolley or walk from Komati Poort, and, having no transport animals, was free to wander, accompanied by a few native carriers, as he chose through the fly belts.

The thick bush south of the Sabi River, from the temporary bridge eastwards to the Lebombo, continued to be the prerogative of the local natives, and it is they who seem primarily to have been responsible for the destruction, during the 'nineties, of nearly all the black rhinoceroses, just as their fathers had made a clean sweep of the square-lipped type, some thirty years previously. At this period, the ba-Hlangane were practically a clan of professional hunters, and they did enormous damage to the game, especially during the summer months, when the white men were absent from the Low-Veld.

North of the Olifants, the Amagwamba, ba-Venda and others, adepts in the use of the bow and poisoned arrow, were equally active. Great game drives were often held, and among the Lebombo Hills to this day may be seen the remains of the lines of pits into which the animals were stampeded during these hunts. A narrow defile between two steep hills was chosen when possible, and across it were dug many parallel rows of pits, each of them ten or twelve feet long, ten feet deep, and six feet wide at the top, narrowing towards the bottom. All were of course skilfully hidden by light sticks covered with grass, while the upper edges were buttressed with logs of hard wood, to prevent the earth giving way. The hunters would then form a semicircle, and, gradually closing in, slowly drive all the herds thus enclosed down-wind towards the gap in the hills. On nearing the chosen place, the animals would become more and more crowded and alarmed, until finding all other egress from the ring of their pursuers closed, they would dash, in a terrified, crowded mass, through the gorge, straight on the deadly line of pits, into which they would fall pell-mell, a kicking, struggling mass, many of them with broken limbs.

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Those underneath were often crushed or suffocated to death by the weight of their companions. When the pits were full, and the rear of the herds, dashing over their fallen leaders, had stampeded away into the distance, the natives would spear to death all those on top, to keep the mass quiet, and would then at their leisure haul out, skin, and cut up as many animals as they required. Sometimes the bag was so large that there was more meat than could be carried away, and accordingly the animals at the bottom of the pit were left to die slowly. Almost at every place where there exists or has in the past existed some favourite drinking pool, may be seen the old filled-in remains of game pits, often scores together, dug in the game tracks to entrap unwary animals on their way to or from the water.

Very cleverly constructed snares of twisted raw hide were often employed, so designed that when an animal stepped on the inside of a stretched noose a spring was released, and the other end of the cord, attached to a bent sapling, went taut, thus tightening the noose and swinging up the creature suspended by one leg, to remain in this position until the hunters came along and disposed of him. Fall-traps and other snares of every imaginable kind were also employed. Dogs were used to run down waterbuck, kudu, reedbuck, warthog, and the young of all species. This sort of thing went on uninterruptedly the whole year round, and, added to the enormous toll taken by the numerous white hunters in winter, rapidly thinned out the herds.

In 1896 came the rinderpest, which nearly exterminated the kudu, and reduced the already much depleted buffalo herds to about a dozen individuals. After the passing of the rinderpest it was discovered that the tsetse fly, to which the game had owed its survival, had also disappeared. The reason for this sudden and complete elimination of *Glossina* from the whole of its formerly extensive haunts within the Low-Veld, and apparently indeed from every other spot in Africa which the rinderpest had visited, still remains a complete mystery. The casual and easy explanation that it vanished because, owing to the death of all the game, there was no more food available,

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is easily disposed of by the fact that only certain species of the larger animals proved vulnerable to the disease, and that, in the case at least of the Low-Veld fly areas, even these were by no means exterminated. Enough kudu remained to allow the species, under protection, to become in less than twenty years, next to impala (which the rinderpest left entirely alone), the most numerous of all the bush-loving types. Even if, as is said, only a dozen buffalo were spared, surely these, strictly confined as they were to a relatively small area of dense bush in the heart of the fly belt, were enough to have saved at least some flies from dying of starvation.

The attempt to account for the disappearance of the tsetse fly by such crude reasoning as that often proffered, is understandable on the part of the mere man-in-the-street, who has no reason for specially devoting his thinking powers to the question; but is depressing when emanating from persons of scientific attainment, pointing, as it does, to lack of due examination of past and present conditions both of the area and of the animals inhabiting it. Even allowing for the temporary wanderings of animals to points outside the fly belts during the course of the epidemic, the insect is well known to be able to exist for a long time without a meal of blood, and so could easily have endured until the return of its hosts, especially seeing that bush-dwelling mammals are not in the habit of migrating far afield. It does seem to be a great pity that so little attention has been paid to the investigation of the true cause of the disappearance of the tsetse fly at the time of the rinderpest. Research work in that direction might indeed have far-reaching results, for could the basic reason be discovered, the tsetse problem, which has cost so much time and money, and which, in unscrupulous hands, has proved so facile a weapon for the destruction of all the larger forms of wild life, would at least be on the high road to complete solution.

Whether the tsetse fly will ever find a road of return to its old quarters in the Low-Veld is of course on the knees of the gods: at least it is safe to say that during the past thirty years there have been no indications of its approach. The nearest fly areas are those of Zululand, whence *pallidipes* was never,

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very well stocked, though it seemed probable that with better watering facilities, such as might be provided by the improvement of some of the natural rock dams barring the dry spruits, the country might hold with ease at least five times the number of animals actually present. Outside the National Park the game, both great and small, was rapidly disappearing, and in fact the adjoining areas, including the nearest part of Portuguese East Africa, were really fed by its overflow.

As regards species indigenous to the Low-Veld, the only one completely lost has been the white or square-lipped rhinoceros. In 1902 the elephant and the eland had actually disappeared, while several other species were within measurable distance of extinction; but at a later date both these named again made their appearance as immigrants from Portuguese Territory, and have thriven so well that in 1926 there were probably a hundred of the former, and many considerable herds of the latter in the country north of the Olifants River. The inyala was found to exist to the north of the Shingwedsi, a discovery of some importance, as the animal had not generally been understood to thrive in the Union of South Africa at any distance from the coast, or further north than the Maputa River, though professional hunters were well acquainted with its existence in Portuguese East Africa, north of the Limpopo.

The red or Natal duiker, a species confined to the wooded kloofs of the Drakensberg foothills, has been nearly or wholly exterminated by natives with snares and dogs; the vaal rhebuck, partial only to the tops of high flat hills, is not really a Low-Veld resident, and though a few specimens were believed to survive in the western areas, its final disappearance, where not specially preserved on private land, seems to be in sight. Oribi, though specimens have been occasionally noticed as far east as the Lebombo Flats, appear in the Low-Veld rather by force of circumstances than as willing visitors. Mountain reedbuck (rooi rhebuck) are localized to the slopes of the western foothills, but are there fairly numerous.

Other species of the larger herbivorous mammals have been fully preserved in the National Park, and occasionally are even



HIPPOPOTAMI IN KOMATI RIVER

These interesting creatures exist in all the larger and some of the smaller Low-Veld rivers
(Photo by Lt.-Col. F. C. Houre)



ZEBRAS AT WATER

(Photo by Lt.-Col. F. C. Houre)

hidden danger. While I was watching a pool where a troop of baboons was drinking, a lurking chita suddenly made a dash at a detached female. Immediately there arose a terrific clamour of shrieks, mingled with the deep angry barks of the old males, two or three of which at once charged the enemy. The latter did not pause to consider matters, but retreated incontinently, pursued for several hundred yards by a big "old man." As he fled, the chita, though careful not to admit his slow-moving pursuer to close quarters, evidently realized that there was no need for special effort, and proceeded at a loping canter, sometimes pausing till the baboon came within three or four yards of him.

In the Low-Veld, elephants, buffaloes and all carnivora drink at night. The first named are not at present found far south of the Olifants River, but north of it, especially near the Letaba, there are several fair-sized herds. From long immunity they have come almost to disregard the presence of human beings, and are sometimes rather a trial. For instance, an elephant has been known to pull the thatch off a store hut in a village that he might get at the grain which he realized was within. Since, in a sanctuary, more drastic methods are taboo, I have found the judicious use of rockets directed towards the animals, to be sometimes efficacious in scaring them from places where they have no rightful business. Not long ago a single bull elephant in broad daylight came walking up a hill right into the white ranger's station near the Letaba River. When he was within some fifty yards of the house, the dogs rushed out barking, which seemed to annoy him; but after a few minutes of tense anxiety lest he would pursue his tormentors and incidentally knock down the rather fragile homestead, he decided, though under protest, to go away.

Elephants and rhinoceroses have a very keen sense of smell, but are so near-sighted that they are unable to distinguish a motionless human being, whom they have not winded, from a tree stump, even at quite a short distance. The primates (baboons and monkeys), on the contrary, have extraordinarily sharp eyesight, but little more sense of smell than man himself. Most other wild animals, though they always rely on their noses

rather than on their eyes, possess remarkably keen sight, and, except the primates, can see very well in the dark. In this last respect the cat tribe are the most gifted, and from choice seek their prey amid what to human eyes appears to be inky blackness, accompanied, to be quite ideal, by wind and rain. On moonlit nights, lions seldom hunt, realizing that they are then at a disadvantage with their quarry; wild dogs and chitas, on the other hand, which rely on speed to catch their game, are crepuscular by habit, and never hunt at night unless there is a fairly good moon.

The herbivorous animals cannot see so well at night as the felines, yet even then their eyesight is good enough often to detect danger in time to escape from it, and they are by no means entirely dependent on their sense of smell. All creatures which can see in the dark react strongly to a light flashed into their eyes at night; the carnivores reflecting greenish-yellow, and the antelopes bright red. At Sabi Bridge, in the Game Reserve, the impala always came close up to the garden fence after dark, and I often amused myself by walking out after dinner with a head-lamp attached to my hat-band. It was curious to see everywhere points of red light darting hither and thither like fire-flies, the animals themselves being quite invisible. The experience was similar when going among the dogs in the compound; but the moving lights were then, of course, greenish-yellow, and only the eyes of a certain grey-eyed dog reflected deep crimson. The eyes of a lion or leopard seem really to blaze when the light shines directly into them; but of course there is nothing spontaneous about this. If the eyes of predatory beasts glowed of their own energy at night, they would obviously betray the presence of their owners to the game, which would then easily avoid capture.

In a forested country, all wild animals which are accustomed to being preyed upon rely for their first line of defence upon concealment: it is only when they think they are observed, or feel they cannot escape observation, that they seek refuge in flight. Every hunter knows how difficult it is to spot an animal standing perfectly still in covert, and all animals, whether herbivores or carnivores, certainly find still greater