

HOUSE TO HOUSE AT THE ZOO: ANTELOPES

BY L. R. BRIGHTWELL

THOSE who have read these very abridged histories will appreciate that the name of a Zoo house cannot always, despite the Society's best endeavours, be guaranteed to be strictly applicable to all its occupants. Zoo keeping must always be a matter of ways and means, and it frequently happens that an animal must be accommodated where and as the exigencies of the moment dictate. This is particularly the case with the antelopes, for the very word "antelope" is sufficiently ambiguous. It is found in old French, medieval Latin, and Greek as a title for the fabled unicorn or one of the several creatures that inspired this imaginary beast. Zoologists have adopted the word as a convenient term to describe almost any horned ungulate not obviously an ox, sheep, goat, deer, or giraffe. In the Society's Vertebrate List (1828-1927) we find under the general heading of Bovidae not only the recognized antelopes, but such hard-to-place creatures as the Musk Ox, Rocky Mountain "Goat," Serow and Takin. (See photo, p. 54). It may be said that the living antelopes are generally more uniform in contour than the members of many other orders, and that the more fantastic species, some with heads literally bristling with horns, even to strange erections on the nasal bones, ceased to exist prior to the human era. (See Scott's "A History of Land Mammals in the Western Hemisphere.")

The present Antelope House, once greatly admired, is a plain "L"-shaped building having on one side a large rectangular paddock, which early reporters enthusiastically described as "The Veldt." It will be found on the left of the Broad Walk, approaching from the south gate, and quite close to the Ostrich House. It was built in 1859, and an extension added at a cost of £4,000 in 1861. It held Blesbok, Lechwe, Sable, Hartebeest, Addax, Leucoryx, Nyulghaie, and White-tailed and Brindled Gnus. One of the first antelopes ever received was an albino Blackbuck, taken over from the Tower menagerie in 1825. It died a few months after arrival.

Whatever the defects of the present house from an æsthetic viewpoint, it seems to suit its occupants, being dark and warm, and the swing doors give the more nervous animals sufficient warning of a visitor's approach. A. D. Bartlett was an advocate

of squeaky boots for keepers, as he maintained that the sudden and silent appearance of a human being stampeded some species, resulting in broken legs and even necks. Keeper Shelley and his very efficient helpers, however, do not entirely support this view. The house is very popular with artists, since antelopes in repose are particularly static. The big paddock with its rocky, drinking pool and salt licks offers abundant scope for exercise. At one time secretary birds were given free range here, when they assorted very appropriately with elands and gazelles. These latter, however, are more usually housed in a series of small enclosures in the middle garden near the Hippopotamus House. The Society has at various times exhibited a good proportion of the hundred-and-thirty-odd species figured in Sclater and Oldfield Thomas's standard work, "The Book of the Antelopes," published in 4 vols., in 1896.

One of the Society's aims was to be of economic service to the community. Antelopes, especially the Eland, were at one time intended to supplement the nation's meat supply. So optimistic were all concerning this matter that on 21st January, 1859, an Eland Dinner was held at the London Tavern. Many lights of Science and Society attended, Professor Owen taking the chair. Both he and the secretary, Mr. Mitchell, spoke in glowing terms of the savoury future offered by this venture, and both Owen and Frank Buckland later dilated upon the virtues of Eland in the Press:

These first elands, two bulls and a cow, were introduced by Lord Derby in 1842, and six calves were produced in the first twelve years. But the Knowsley herd, as it was called, seems to have suffered from in-breeding, and was eventually overshadowed by the Duke of Bedford's herd, founded in 1892. This consisted of a pair from the Zoo and seventeen imported specimens. Some score of calves were born, though not all thrived. The herd maintained at Woburn just prior to the First World War was described as "very large." But despite all this, the roast beef of our islands still holds its own, at least theoretically.

One man's meat is another's emetic, but it will be agreed that the general edibility of the antelopes, classed gastronomically as venison, has been

largely responsible for their alarming decrease since the advent of firearms. The writer has sampled impala, eland, sable, gazelle, lesser koodoo, and blackbuck, and found all very similar in general flavour and texture. The blackbuck is generally acclaimed as the choicest, and in pre-war days it was even found possible on some estates to fatten a few for festive purposes. A very fine herd of about sixteen of these antelopes graces the estate of Mr. Alfred Ezra, at Foxwarren. When driving across country with the grace of wind-blown leaves, the elder of the does not infrequently take astonishing leaps in mid-stride and make a lightning survey of all around them. The senior buck brings up the rear.

A full record of the many species successfully bred at the Zoo will be found in the Vertebrate List and subsequent Annual Reports.

Most antelopes are fairly tameable, exceptions being the gnus, which in the large areas available at Whipsnade fully justify at rutting time, the Afrikaans name of wildebeest. But the history of antelope houses has been gratifyingly free from untoward incident. Mention should be made, however, of the reception of the so-called American antelope or Prong-buck, received in January, 1865. This strikingly marked and very fleet-footed animal is the last survivor of a race of extravagantly horned ruminants well figured in Frick's work, "Horned Ruminants of N. America. Although trappers and hunters had long known of the deciduous nature of this animal's horns, the account had been discounted by such able observers as Audubon, Bachman and others, and no accredited scientist had witnessed the phenomenon. But, on the morning of 7th November, 1865, a keeper, much excited, ran into Bartlett's office with the news that one of the new antelope's horns had fallen off. A. D. Bartlett at once clapped on his top hat and rushed to the Antelope House just in time to see the other horn join its fellow on the floor. But the buds of new horns were already in evidence, and these in due course attained to full stature. (*Proc. Zool. Soc. Lond.*, 1865, p. 718).

Other remarkable antelope-like creatures that have figured in the collection are the Serow of South-East Asia (1906), the Chamois (1831) (five were bred between 1864 and 1911), the Takin (1909), (see photo p. 54), which won fame by its painfully noticeable aroma, and the Rocky Mountain "goat" (1899). This unique creature from Elfa Mountain, British Columbia, elected to spend all its time on the steeply sloping roof of its shed, accepting it apparently as the next best thing to a precipice. This and the Takin were the first of their kind ever seen alive in Europe. Of the former, a mounted skin in the Society's museum (1829), was, it is believed, the

first museum example in the world; and the living specimen the first to be seen in any menagerie.

In December, 1936, the Zoo received a female and young of the rare Bongo antelope. A painting of this female with her calf in the Society's collection was made by the well-known animal artist, S. Tresilian, and appeared as a special supplement to ZOO LIFE.

At the moment this house contains certain animals other than antelopes. A striking figure is "Lorna" (see photo, p. 63), a Black rhinoceros received in 1947 and remarkably docile for her species. Another outsider is the Anoa, the dwarf buffalo of Celebes, whose short backward curved horns have been described by the animal collector Mr. H. A. Frost, as being used in the manner of a hayfork to lift up dense masses of rattan creeper through which the animal is obliged to thread its way. At the Zoo a young bull has learned to use its horns to push back the heavy sliding door of its loose-box at closing time. In this house also is temporarily lodged the Society's collection of zebras, rendered homeless by the blitz of 1942. A bomb demolished their proper quarters near the giraffes and the animals careered down Parkway, Camden Town, with the keepers and secretary in pursuit. All were brought back unhurt. But on the whole the Antelope House has enjoyed a very unruffled history. It may be of interest to note that several desert species, believed never to drink in their own countries, soon acquire a taste for water after a short spell in the Zoo.

Whereas the London Zoo can ill afford square yards, Whipsnade can offer acres, and such antelopes as can prosper at an altitude of seven hundred feet above sea-level have done well in the Bedfordshire animal park. A small herd of White-tailed Gnu, some Blackbuck and Nylghaie have long been established features. A small herd of Brindled Gnus, led by a ferocious bull appropriately named "Satan," also once held residence, but have since returned to London. The Nylghaie in particular have prospered. A cow and two bulls settled here in 1937 have now increased by eight born over a period of about ten years. All are very docile in the keeper's hands, though the old bull, standing about 54 inches at the shoulder and possessed of enormous strength, can be very "difficult" at rutting time. Foxes entering the Nylghaie paddock invariably leave hurriedly.

At least three times since its inception some nineteen years ago the park has been cut off from the outside world by snowfall for several weeks together. The last such isolation was in 1947. Yet the antelopes fared well, exercising daily in small yards, partly cleared by the keepers and partly stamped out by the animals themselves in the deep snow. Such improvised enclosures were surprisingly warm. Feeding at such times was effected by Keeper



"LORNA," A FEMALE BLACK RHINOCEROS (*R. bicornis*)
FROM KENYA

Photo: Fox Photos Ltd.

Phil Bates, who made his way to his charges through the snow tunnels in a car which some years ago was given honourable mention, as a vehicle unique, in one of the leading motoring journals.

It may be hard for some to reconcile such conditions with animals popularly associated with grassy plains bathed in perpetual sunshine. But the plains of both Africa and Asia often know chilly nights and long periods of searing winds. One antelope at least, the extraordinary Saiga (*Saiga tatarica* Linnaeus), hails from the barren steppes of Russia and Western Asia, which for long periods must offer the most rigorous conditions. A male Saiga was received in exchange from the Moscow Zoo in November, 1864.

The antelopes must be largely regarded as a dying race, victims of human greed and lack of foresight. There are, for example, credible accounts of the Springbok once travelling in such vast herds that chance lions caught in the close packed ranks were forced to travel with them during their migratory treks. Today the emblem of South Africa is on its

way to becoming a museum piece. The opening up of new territories, involving the feeding of thousands of temporary labourers with the nearest meat to hand, plus the pestilential trophy hunter, and unscrupulous dealers of all kinds, have gone far to decimate once teeming herds. In 1948 the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire, under its secretary, Mr. Henry G. Maurice, C.B., staged a special exhibition in the library of the House of Commons, to rouse members to the crying need for tightened legislature regarding the protection of antelopes and other game animals. It may be added that this society should automatically attract and enlist the support of all genuinely interested in the conservancy of animal life.

The Bluebuck, a near relative of the Roan Antelope, disappeared finally in 1800, the Bontebok, Blesbok, and White-tailed Gnu exist only in a few small reserves and scientific menageries. Indeed, such places may in time offer the last of the antelopes their only hopes of a permanent and unassailable sanctuary.