

Certain birds  
associate  
with mammals  
for very practical  
reasons



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*'When a hippo comes out of the water on to a sandbank occupied by birds, it always looks slightly out of place'*

# LIVING OFF YOUR FRIENDS

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by RENNIE BERE

IN Africa one seldom sees any of the larger mammals without their attendant birds. Most commonly it is the cattle egret, a small white heron whose back is faintly tinged with buff.

These herons follow the herds of cattle or game and feed on the grasshoppers and other insects kicked up by their feet. And there is something rather comical in the sight of an elephant with the little white bird standing beside it in its slightly pompous way. They are frequently known as tick-birds but rarely feed on ticks. They ride on an animal's back for the very good reason that it saves them walking. On foot the bird cannot keep up. In flight it moves too fast; and sometimes when an elephant or buffalo is actually in water or mud, the bird just has to ride.

The cattle egret is by no means the only bird that feeds on insects disturbed by the larger mammals. The pia-piac, a small and noisy member of the crow family which is extremely common in parts of Africa, is another. Nearer home the robin's friendly nature is dictated at least in part by something of the same urge.

Whenever one sees any bird making a mock attack on a grazing animal or on another larger bird, it is not doing it out of devilment, as one might suppose, but to get the creature moving on the ground. The carmine bee-eater, one of the most beautiful of birds, is adept at this stratagem and delights in dive-bombing the greater bustard or secretary bird as well as various antelope.

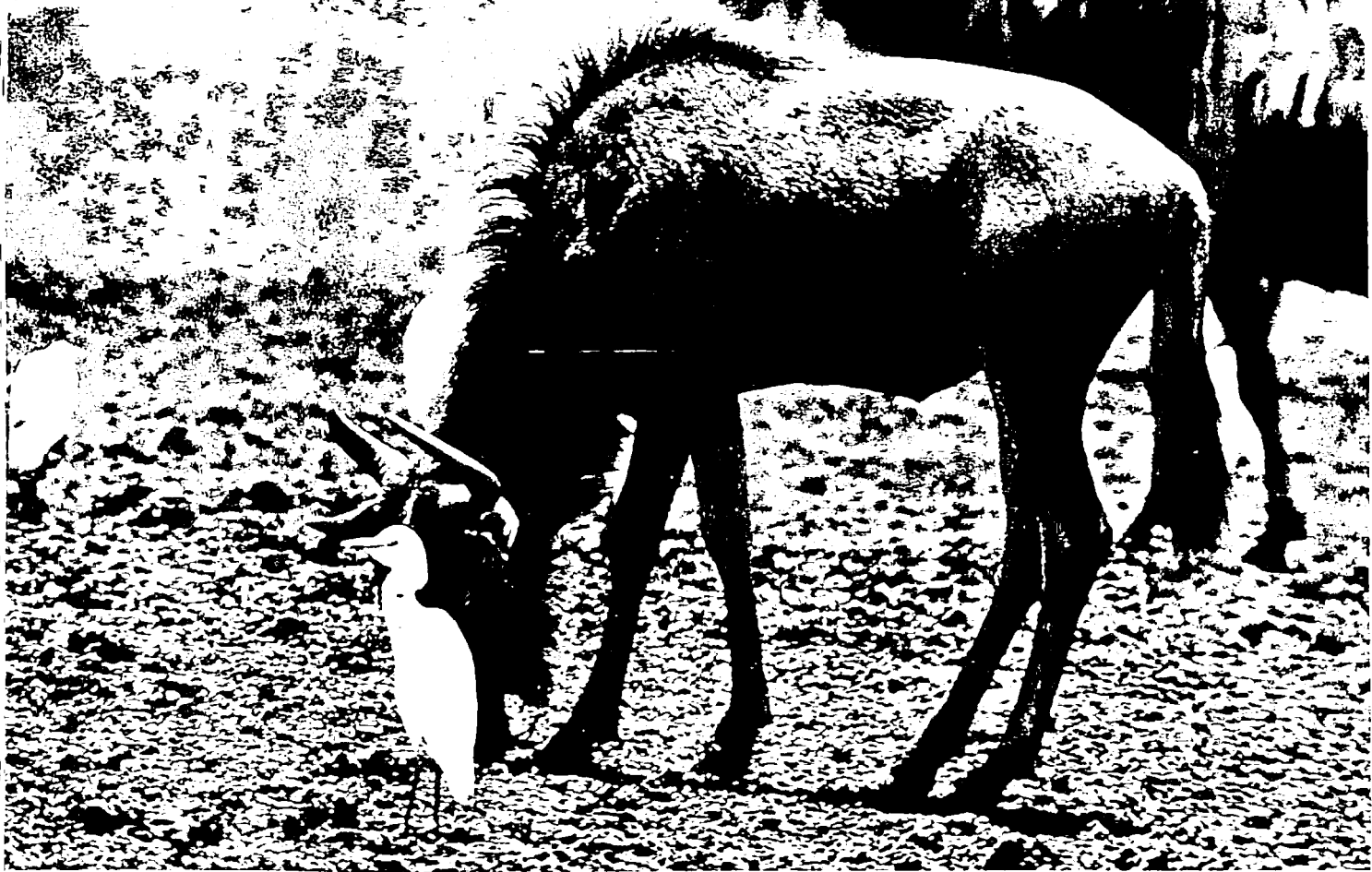
## Ox-peckers

Of all birds, those which associate most with the larger mammals are the red-billed and yellow-billed ox-peckers, relations of the starling with habits rather like a woodpecker. But instead of climbing about on trees and pecking away at the bark, it climbs all over its animal hosts and pecks at the ticks or other external parasites on which it feeds. And as it operates freely on the more sensitive parts such as eyes, ears, and nostrils, as well as

open sores and wounds, these attentions cannot be very comfortable. Indeed, before the dipping of cattle became general, these birds did a lot of damage to the domestic herds.

Most commonly the ox-pecker associates with buffalo, rhinoceros, and giraffe—it is on the neck of a giraffe that its behaviour is most reminiscent of a woodpecker. In return for the easy living which these creatures provide, the bird acts as a sentinel, warning the animal of the approach of danger. It gives this warning by means of its peculiar cackling alarm call, a function which is particularly valuable to the rhino whose sight is bad and whose other senses are extremely dull.

*A profusion of hippos, accompanied by many hundreds of birds, can be seen on the shores of Lake Edward, in the Congo Republic*



*Cattle egrets hope that the foraging of these wildebeests will disturb enough insects to provide an unearned meal*

Many hunters have had reason to curse these birds for ruining a carefully executed stalk. But I certainly have one of them to thank for keeping me out of serious trouble.

#### **A lucky escape**

I was walking unarmed with one of our Rangers through the open grassland of the Murchison Falls National Park, seeking out a line for a new road. There were apparently no animals about, nor were there any trees, but we saw ahead of us a likely looking vantage point in the shape of a small ant-hill.

We started walking towards it without paying much attention. When we were about thirty yards off, an ox-pecker got up excitedly. We turned and tip-toed quietly away. It was not an ant-hill towards which we were walking—the bird had saved us from climbing a recumbent rhino!

There is another interesting aspect of the ox-pecker's relationship with its

hosts. When it nests, in some convenient cavity in a tree, the lining is the hair of the mammals on which it rides and feeds.

Perhaps the most remarkable of all mammal-bird relationships (symbiosis is the technical expression) is that of the honey guide. This is a small, inconspicuous bird of open woodland or forest fringes, and it makes use of the services of both man and the ratel or honey-badger. It is the greater, or black-throated, variety which behaves so remarkably.

This bird feeds largely on honey and the grubs that it contains. But it is seldom able to get at the honey itself for its bill is too weak; wild bees in Africa usually swarm in the hollow of some tree and the actual opening may be very small. So the bird seeks help either from man or the sharp-clawed honey-badger, both able to dig out the comb with ease.

When the bird finds a suitable collaborator it flies ahead with its tail

fanned out, calling continuously with a persistent rattling chatter, and alights on a branch usually about eight or ten yards away. It flutters on from branch to branch as one follows it, guiding you towards the honey, the whereabouts of which it always knows. Then it waits expectantly near-by while the honey is being dug out.

The distance over which the bird will guide varies enormously. My own longest experience has been about half a mile in rough mountainous country, but journeys of double that distance have been recorded.

#### **African legend**

Africans in the bush on the look-out for honey—and the true wild honey of Africa is quite delectable—watch for the bird rather than the bee. And as the badger always shares the meal with its benefactor, a human honey-hunter should always do the same. Indeed if he fails to do so, or if he refuses to dig out the honey, it is said that next time

the bird will guide him to some dangerous snake or beast of prey.

This, of course, is pure legend, though it is believed by many Africans and others with long experience in the bush. I myself have heard of a honey guide actually behaving in this way.

### A strange coincidence

Peter Molloy, then Director of the Tanganyika National Parks, had failed to share his honey earlier in the day, and was out for an evening stroll. Not far from his tent the honey guide appeared again. He followed it rather absent-mindedly, but was soon brought up short by two lion cubs which came gambolling towards him from a clump of bushes in which their mother must certainly have been hidden.

This was probably coincidence, but one cannot help wondering. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that the bird, having failed to get its honey, had gone off to look for a more likely collaborator. There is still a lot to learn about the behaviour of wild creatures and this guiding habit is by no means fully understood.

These are not the only examples of the association of birds and mammals, but they are the most complete. There are times when several other insect-eating birds behave in the same way as the cattle egret or the ox-pecker, but they are not in a state of permanent dependence on their animal hosts. Many different water-birds seem to wander all over the hippopotamus, but often enough this is simply because they mistake it for a rock. And when the hippo comes out of the water on to a sandbank occupied by birds, it always looks slightly lost in such unlikely company.



*Two egrets take a free ride on the back of an elephant. They are useful to the elephant because at the first hint of danger they will fly off in alarm—an invaluable warning system*

*The sharp beak of the ox-pecker as it searches for insects hidden in the fur, can produce painful wounds on such mammals as the impala (right)*

*Ox-peckers peck away at parasites on the bodies of their animal carriers. Here they are making use of the rhino (below)*

