

LE VAILLANT'S MAMMAL PAINTINGS

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ROUGHLY a quarter of the paintings in the Le Vaillant collection portray mammals. These paintings, apart from their value as Africana and any artistic merit they may have, by their number and the nature of the subject matter portrayed, form a significant source of information about the natural history of the Cape during the latter part of the eighteenth century, as well as contributing, if obliquely, to the controversy surrounding the extent of Le Vaillant's travels.

With a few notable exceptions, such as one bat (Plate 110) and a spring hare (Plate 107), most of the subjects portrayed are game animals. This bias in the nature of the subject material is not as important as it may seem, as the smaller, less conspicuous species which Le Vaillant largely ignored have been little affected by the advance of civilization, and today occur roughly where they did in Le Vaillant's time, probably even in very much the same numbers; and it is exactly those more conspicuous animals that Le Vaillant emphasizes which have in many cases disappeared, either altogether or at least in part of their ranges, so that what information can be gained about them from his work is of considerable value.

Most of the mammals illustrated are discussed at various places in Le Vaillant's accounts of his travels, which adds to their potential value as scientific records, and it is of interest to consider each of the animals in question in the light of both the painting and Le Vaillant's notes about it. An annotated catalogue of these mammals therefore follows.

Chiroptera

Yellow-winged bat – *Lavia frons* (E. Geoffroy). Plate 110

This animal is described as "the bat with four ears from the banks of the Elephants River". (The mention of this river in the caption is clearly an error, for in his account of the bat Le Vaillant says that he encountered it in Great Namaqualand, in an area which Professor Forbes places at some fifty miles north of the Orange River.*) Le Vaillant's description refers to

surprise to find that his illustration, purporting to portray a male tuskless elephant from Little Namaqualand, is in fact a remarkably good painting of an Asiatic elephant. This is evident from several features, including its small ears, rounded back, concave forehead, trunk with only one lip, and the number of toes, which appears to be five front and four rear, as in the Asiatic, and not four and three as in the African species. Further circumstantial evidence is provided by the lack of tusks, which are, as Le Vaillant remarks, more frequently absent in the Asiatic elephant (and particularly in females, where they are seldom if ever present) than in the African.

It is difficult to see how this error could have arisen. It is of course obvious that the painting was *not* done in Little Namaqualand; most probably it was done after Le Vaillant's return to France, and either copied from an existing illustration of an Asiatic elephant, or drawn from life, using a captive animal such as a zoo specimen as a model. However, even so it seems unlikely that Le Vaillant himself would have made so elementary a blunder, in view of his evident knowledge of elephants. The only explanation appears to be that the painting was done by one of his illustrators and not checked by him, or that he left the illustration unnamed, presumably knowing it to be of the Asiatic species, and that a later owner erroneously concluded that it represented the "poenskop" elephant, naming it accordingly.

Perissodactyla

Black rhinoceros – *Diceros bicornis* (Linnaeus). Plate 101

Le Vaillant encountered rhino for the first time north of the Orange River, during his second journey. Indeed, although he states in the narrative of his first journey that he found signs of a rhino along the Platte River²⁵ and hunted fruitlessly for it, he later seems to have come to the conclusion that the rhinoceros had been exterminated in the Cape before his coming – in referring to Sparrman's travels (1772–6) in his second narrative he says that "If there were abundance of rhinoceroses in Quammedaka in the time of Dr. Sparrman, there were none there in my time, any more than in the colony itself, which they deserted in proportion as it began to be better peopled".²⁶

All his encounters with rhino took place north of the Orange River, where both black and white rhinoceros are believed to have occurred, but he nowhere mentions the white rhino, nor indicates in any way that he is aware of the distinction between the two species. The animal he illustrates

is quite clearly a black rhino, judging from the shape of the snout. Presumably, therefore, he did not encounter the white rhino on his travels.

An amusing sidelight concerns the value attached by the Hottentots to rhinoceros blood as a remedy. When his travelling companion Swanepoel, in a somewhat spirituously elevated state, falls under the wheels of his wagon and fractures two ribs, he asks for rhinoceros blood, which “is a medicine in repute, I know not why, both among the colonists and the savages. It is reckoned excellent for luxations, fractures, and inward hurts in general.”²⁷ In this case, rhinoceros blood not being available, Swanepoel drinks brandy instead and in time recovers. About this Le Vaillant comments that “Nature alone effected a cure; but he ascribed it to liquor, and acknowledged that this remedy, equally proper, he said, for the sick and the sound, was preferable to the other”.²⁸

Extinct quagga – *Equus quagga* Gmelin. Plate 108

The last quagga died in the Amsterdam zoo in 1883;²⁹ before then this animal had been extinct in the wild state for about ten years. At the time of Le Vaillant’s visit to the Cape, however, it was probably still fairly common. He refers to the animal in his second narrative but does not state where he encountered it. His illustration has been entitled “Le Kwagga ou ane rayé de l’intérieur du Cap”. In this connection there seems to be some confusion in terminology. The caption to his beautiful illustration of this animal refers to the quagga as a striped ass, while in his narrative he says that “at the Cape, the zebra is known under the name of *streep-ezel* (the striped ass), and the quagga under that of *wilde-paerd* (the wild horse)”.³⁰ Ironically, he goes on to say that “in the colonies the names and the animals are sometimes both confounded; which, in natural history, may occasion errors”. (It should be remembered, however, that he may not have been responsible for some, or indeed any, of the captions which appear on his hitherto unpublished paintings.)

Le Vaillant properly disdains the suggestion that the quagga is a hybrid between a zebra and a horse. Stating that Vosmaer, “who never travelled in Africa, and who, consequently, could know the quagga only from the accounts of others”, and even Buffon regard it as such, he takes the opportunity of airing his scorn for what he terms “theories formed in the closet”, and rather loftily remarks that field naturalists would not have made this mistake.³¹

Besides the quagga and the zebra, which he appears to have encountered repeatedly on his travels, he refers also to a wild ass, distinct from either, “for, instead of having a striped skin like the zebra, it is of one colour, which



Black rhinoceros. *Diceros bicornis* (Linnaeus).

FRANÇOIS LE VAILLANT
TRAVELLER IN SOUTH AFRICA

*and his collection of
165 water-colour paintings*

1781-1784

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