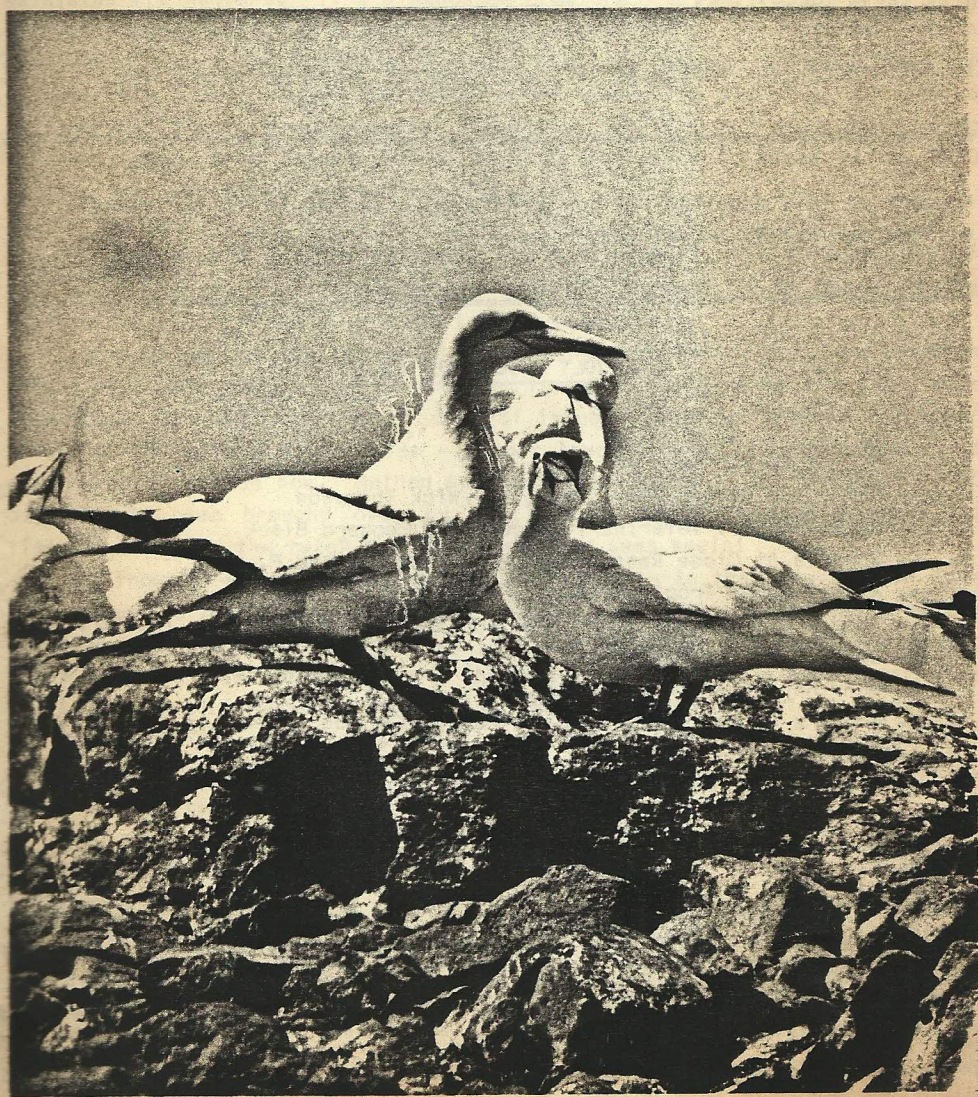

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THE ZOOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

by L.C. Rookmaaker

1989, 368pp., 23 x 30 cm., 165 illustrations. 16 colour plates. £53/\$95,
A.A. Balkema Publishers, P.O. Box 1675, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

It was indeed a pleasure - and a revelation - to review this splendid work by a young Dutch zoologist. Briefly, very briefly, it deals with the period 1650 to 1790, when travellers - many of whom took a keen interest in the fauna they observed and collected - were making the first real surveys of the interior of Southern Africa - people like Forster, Gordon, Masson, Paterson, Sparrmann, Thunberg and Levaillant. (I've little doubt some readers will know of a number of bird species named after the latter French explorer). The documents, letters, diaries, journals, notes and illustrations they compiled for posterity are contained in this erudite volume in the appropriate chapters dealing with each individual, and there is a comprehensive section devoted to each species listed or recorded with, of course, much valuable and important data. Obviously, some of the species or sub-species are now extinct, such as the Bluebuck, Quagga and Cape Lion, but this adds to the book's fascination.

A great many of the illustrations are sketches and paintings by the collectors themselves, in fact not a few are of the type specimen of their species. As is usual under these conditions, though, I am struck by the appalling standards of artistry or draughtsmanship applicable at that time when it came to depicting animals - in fact some, particularly of the ungulates such as the Zebras, look veritable caricatures of the sort we would expect from a six year-old child. I've always expressed surprise that, seemingly, two or three hundred years ago people seemed incapable of making simple drawings of what they could plainly see in front of them - and I'm in good company, as in his "Living Mammals Of The World" Ivan T. Sanderson says "Any naturalist with first-hand knowledge of live mammals who ever looked at the illustrations in the older zoological works must have entertained the gravest doubts as to the reliability of the artist's vision..." I must stress, however, that this observation is not a destructive criticism of a major and exhaustively researched book - in fact rather the opposite, as it emphasises its contemporary nature.

The Zoological Exploration Of Southern Africa is not cheap (although which book is nowadays?) but it gathers together - I think for the first time - the collective observations of those who travelled into an unknown land populated by vast numbers of largely unknown species, and in this direction alone serves a most laudable purpose. I wish it every success.

C.H. Keeling