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WILD LIFE ON AND AROUND MOUNT ELGON, EQUATORIAL EAST AFRICA

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Illustrations from Photographs by the Author

PART II. THE ASCENT OF MOUNT ELGON

HIGH were our hopes of observing some really rare game when, on entering the forest our Ndorobo guide pointed to the fresh track of bongo (*Boocercus curyceros isaaci*). But, as these antelopes travel in small troops, it is well nigh impossible to get a glimpse of or approach such wary and elusive game in the dense jungle on the slopes.

Contrary to our expectations the ascent of Elgon was not as arduous an affair as we anticipated, for both Mahieu and I were in fine physical trim. Here and there on the slopes were troops of monkeys. Little did we think that from their number our first shot would secure for us one of our discoveries, *Cercopithecus leucampyx elgonis*.¹ Considerable interest was aroused as it proved to be related to the West African forest form rather than to its neighbor in Kavirondo.

The isolation of Mt. Elgon and its many caves offer unusual facilities for shelter to a fairly dense population. These natives are, as one might expect, for the most part a mixed crowd of fugitives escaped from the cruelty of ravaging oppressors, or else themselves bold robbers, differing much in race and language, especially those living in the many caves. According to rumor, the security these troglodytes derive from their hidden and inaccessible mount-

ain dwellings does not foster in them an over-anxiety to deal with great fairness with their neighbors. Their traditions also have taught them the value of independence. Yet in spite of all this the few we met appreciated our open-handed manner. Under the pacifying influence of British rule even these out-of-the-way regions have been greatly benefited and there is a tendency to leave the caves and settle in the open. The Elgon natives are partly agriculturalists and partly cattle herders. Their flat roofed huts, on a framework of sticks and leaves, are plastered over with layers of cow dung and remind one of similar Masai structures. The "Esomek" live in large and numerous caves of the first cliffs. There is no doubt they at least kill elephant, rhinoceros, giraffe, buffalo, hartebeest and even buck, but their depredations are comparatively occasional, being carried on by but a few of their expert hunters.

Whoever ascends Mt. Elgon can not refrain from speculating upon the origin of the many caves. Joseph Thomson, the first to discover them, believed they represent deserted mines of a vanished race that searched for minerals or precious stones. But, according to Dr. Chester A. Reeds,² this theory has no real foundation. These spacious recesses, generally situated at the base of sheer precipices of volcanic rock, are mostly screened by beautiful cascades

* Arranged for publication by Herbert Lang, Assistant Curator of African Mammals, American Museum of Natural History, New York.

¹ Lönnberg, Rev. Zool. Africaine, VII, 1919, p. 133.

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Giant agave plant on a farm near the town of I. E. in the state of B. The agave plant is one of the most important products of the farm. It is used for the manufacture of the author. The best known in the world is the one that grows in the state of N. The agave plant is one of the most important products of the farm. It is used for the manufacture of the author. The best known in the world is the one that grows in the state of N. The agave plant is one of the most important products of the farm. It is used for the manufacture of the author. The best known in the world is the one that grows in the state of N.



The entrance to Mt. Elgon cavern, which is about seven miles in diameter. In the left foreground the vegetation is mostly arborescent *Sonchus oleraceus*. Mt. Elgon is supposed to be the largest extinct volcano in the world and was probably formed in the later Tertiary period. The highest peak is 14,340 feet above sea level. The great jagged rocks probably were covered at first with volcanic tuff which has been worn away by erosion, leaving only the harder parts.

of water. Some of the joints or fissures at the base of the abysmal terraces were steadily invaded by moisture collected above and along the precipices. But as the upper part of these fissures gradually become more undercut through the action of climatic influences and erosion the cave in getting bigger also became drier and more habitable. At times the natives themselves somewhat enlarged the dimensions of these rocky caverns. Some caves, of which there were about forty along our route, seemed to have their entrance barred by low, flat huts or by irregular palisades. Others were so roomy that a whole village filled but a small corner. To be led behind the vaporous curtains of the screening waterfalls and enter dry-shod the dusky realm of these homes was no small surprise to us. Even before we were accustomed to the stuffy atmosphere and the deafening reverberation of tumbling waters, our attention was captivated by the kaleidoscopic play of colors as one looked out upon the sunlit landscape through the spray. Lost in wonder as we were, the bites of numerous fleas which infested the layers of cow dung and other refuse

carpeting the floor brought us back to earth and once more to the subject of natural history. Some of these subterranean passages invite a host of bats, there being records of *Rousettus lanosus kempi* and *Scotoecus albigula*. Among the rodents attracted by these settlements is the giant rat (*Cricetomys gambianus elgonis*), measuring nearly three feet in length. There is a multitude of other creatures, crustacea, spiders, insects and mollusks, but we could not tarry longer.

At an altitude of from 7,000 to 8,000 feet we entered the zone of trackless bamboo brakes (*Arundinaria alpina*). Here elephants, buffalo, hongo, and the great black boar are still at home. But glorious is the sight above the bamboo belt. For a few hours the sun permits a clear view over the jagged rims left by the centuries of erosion after the last volcanic upheavals. In front of the bluish haze extend magnificent buttresses, deep gorges, luxuriant valleys, and placid lakes. The equatorial alpine flora is as remarkable as peculiar, and reaches nearly to the summit at 14,584 feet (4,445 meters). Below the loftiest elevations the slopes



Interior of a cave on Mt. Elgon. The "Engabuni" or cave dwellers, who live here, still spread the awe-inspiring belief of a strong monster living in a large cave high up in the mountains. They themselves however consider the mighty beast really small in size and attribute to it a beneficent influence over their cattle, of which they own many fine herds. Often a few of their flat huts actually close up the entrance to the cave. In other cases a whole village occupies but one small corner.

are covered with the quaint columns of *Lobelias* and groves of the equally strange arborescent *Senecios* (*Senecio johnstonii*). In the valleys below extend moist areas of a low tussocky formation. Still lower, and just above the bamboo belt, one finds the most enchanting part of the mountain. Stretches of the tree-forming heather with its silvery white flowers (*Ericinella manni*), bushes of *Alchemilla argyrophylla* with their silken, glittering leaves, the masses of ferns, graceful terrestrial orchids, and club-mosses, and the magnificent patches of everlastings, not to mention a host of other flowers, from a pleasant contrast to the velvety grayish-green of the dense carpet below. Particularly noteworthy among the everlastings is *Achyranthes hochstetteri* with its downy stalks of nearly four feet in height, the delicate pink blossoms of *Helichrysum elegantissimum* and *H. newii*, which occur in abundance to the highest pinnacle of Elgon. Here in this dense, generally clustered vegetation is a whole world of smaller rodents.² For some time we followed

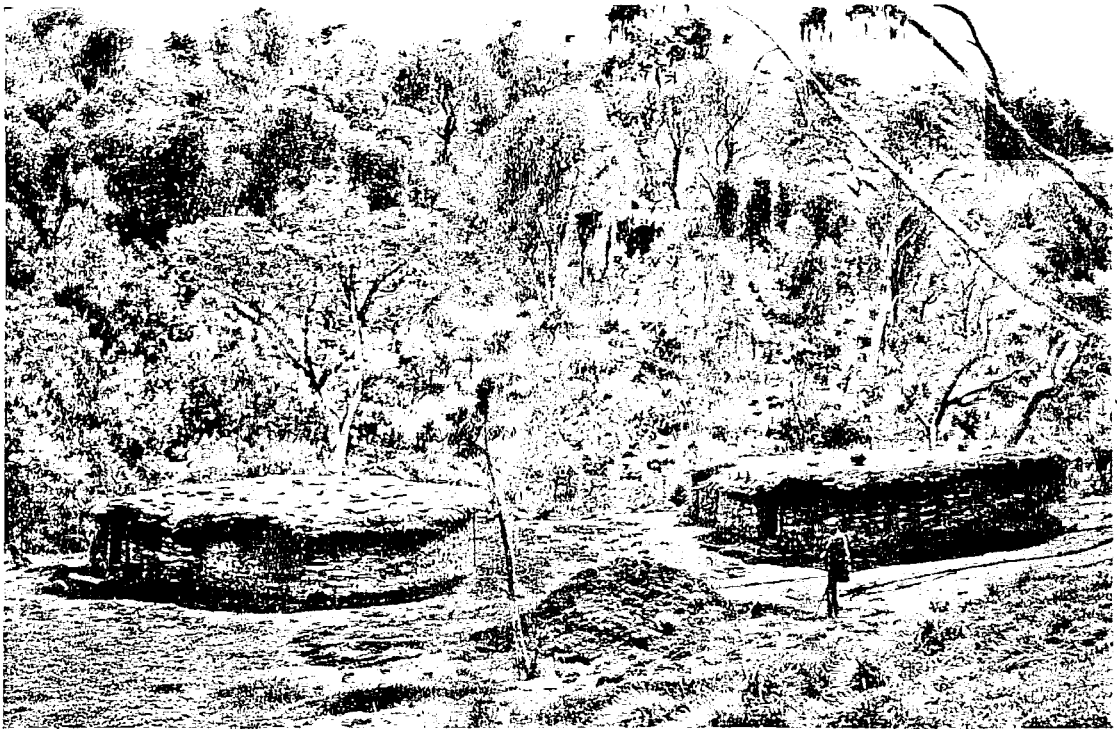
² *Otomys tropicalis elyonis*, *Mylomys cunninghami*, *Lophuromys aquilus zena*, *Tachyoryctes ruddi*, *Graphiurus microtis saturatus*, and *Lepus victoriae*.

a trail of buffalos at about 10,000 feet, but our attention soon shifted to a duiker new to science and since described by Lönnberg¹ (*Sylvicapra grimmia lobeliarum*), which was hiding in *Alchemilla* bushes. We also flushed francolins, and at certain sites hares (*Lepus victoriae*) proved to be common.

Our Ndorobo guides and porters suffered sorely from the cold, damp air near the mountain top, but we were sorry to leave the grandeur of this solitude. While out for one last look we secured a hare which had hardly come to rest after tumbling over some rocks when a hawk (*Buteo augur*) perched itself upon the trunk of a nearby *Senecio*. Just then we noticed again on one of the *Lobelias* the beautiful long-tailed metallic coppery sunbird (*Nectarinia tacazze*).

For our descent we chose the eastern slope of the mountain for at the foot of that side we had left some of our men in charge of the base camp. Crystal clear brooks, imbued with the torrential forces of unbridled youth, awakened a thirst for speed within us that nothing could check until we were back on the caravan

¹ Rev. Zool. Africaine, VII, 1919, p. 181.



On the plateaus between the lands of the fiery sun and the temperate mountain zone the caravan came across these low huts, made on a framework of sticks, twigs and leaves and plastered with layers of cow dung which sheds the rain effectively. These huts are similar in structure to those of the Masai and many are also built in the caves on Mt. Egou.

road. A few days later we marched northward, still for some distance descending abruptly, into the Kerio-Suk country. Coming from the exhilarating mountain air, the temperature noticeably jumped steadily up in the lower lying regions. Game, however, was scarce. Buffalo and hartebeest occasionally came into view and also a troop of the stately roan (*Egocerus equinus langheldi*). Turning now to the right bank of the Turkwel River we cut east across the Suk range. At the Maroon River, an affluent of the Wei-Wei, a gerbil new to science (*Tatera nigricauda bayeri* Lönnberg) was abundant. In the semi-desert, hilly regions between the Turkwel, Wei-Wei, and Kerio Rivers and beyond we again met game in fair numbers. The scanty thornbush vegetation, characteristic of so many parts of Eastern Africa, the open, arid stretches, the scrub on the slopes with dense jungle at the base of the escarpment, the more luxuriant stretches along the rivers, the numerous waterholes, the groves of bifurcate doom-palms, and the fringes of forest offer a livelihood to a great variety of wild

life. Troops of the straight-horned oryx (*Oryx beisa annectens*), grazing elands (*Taurotragus oryx pattersonianus*), restless Grant's gazelles (*Gazella granti notata*), and watchful hartebeest, sleek topi (*Damaliscus korrigum jimela*), loitering waterbuck (*Kobus defassa nzoiae*), swift impala (*Aepyceros melampus suara*), and troops of baboons are among the more common creatures. East of the Kerio giraffes and zebras (*Equus quagga granti*) again enliven the landscape, but one is only rarely rewarded with a glimpse of perhaps the most magnificent of all antelopes, the greater kudu (*Strepsiceros strepsiceros bea*). On the right bank of the Kerio we surprised an old male of the lesser kudu (*Strepsiceros imberbis*).

Black rhinoceros was more numerous at the base of the escarpment. Probably the tall, warlike Suk, who use parts of its hide as shields, do not pursue it into these strongholds. In one of their few habitual wallowing places I found a family of five warthogs unwilling to move into the parched plains. A little farther on, was another mire of considerable extent, but just in a state of drying up. In it elephants had sunk deep pits with their columnar

¹ Rev. Zool. Africaine, V, 1918, p. 179.



At over 9000 feet elevation on Mt. Egmont the heather attains the gigantic size of more than fifteen feet in height. From higher up, nevertheless, the tiny white flowers give the same silvery effect as the smaller forms in temperate climes. The rough-barked tree to the right is a stunted *Podocarpus*.

feet and these holes now contained the last vestiges of water, eagerly frequented by game. On the bushy parts one of the smallest of antelopes, the white spotted dik-dik (*Rhynchotragus nasoguttatus*) was especially common as far south as Lake Baringo. Apparently here it forms the favorite prey of the fastest of the carnivores, the leopard (*Acinonyx jubatus velox*).

Another peculiarity of the country are the remarkably huge and numerous ant hills, whose spires or hollow "chimneys" attain a height of as much as twenty feet. The indefatigable builders of these structures, the "white ants" or termites, force one to move camp frequently as they are liable to destroy much of the camp outfit if it is left on the same spot for any number of days. The extreme solidity and

height of these hills makes them useful points of vantage for hunters as well as for game. Many of them have about their base numerous holes that offer to other creatures a safe subterranean retreat. Often we saw the smaller lizards and also once a large monitor take refuge in them at our approach. In one of these ant hills near the Kerio River the holes also proved to be the homes of a new mongoose (*Hologale percivali tenebrosa*), a band of which was playing outside in the sun.

By June we had lost so many of our pack donkeys through infection from tsetse flies (*Glossina pallidipes*) that the supply of food carried had to be drastically cut down. This forced us to return to the railroad more speedily. Crossing the Kerio again we marched about one hundred miles almost due south to Lake Baringo. Water was now so scarce that only with difficulty could camping sites be found from day to day. Besides, our route passed through many sections where chaotic fields of rocks and even a large mass of hexagonal column-shaped basalt gave proof of past volcanic action, and our porters had a hard time.

Once, toward evening, as we were looking for a camping place, an elephant made straight for

* Lönnberg, Rev. Zool. Africaine, V, 1918, p. 175.



The bush pig is widely distributed across equatorial Africa, but being nocturnal in habits is seldom seen by the average traveler. In the eastern portion of the continent the author visited it is rather grayish in color and is only met singly or at the most but a few together. In the West African Rain Forest, however, its cousin, the red river hog, which gathers in large troops, is highly colored, being shorter haired, bright red with white and black markings, and is generally considered the most beautiful of pigs.



In the drier, thornbush regions of the Kerio country oryx loiter about in small herds of a dozen or so and in general do not mingle with herds of other antelopes. Solitary bulls, as in many other forms, often wander about alone. Only when cornered at close quarters do the oryx use their dangerously sharp horns in defense, but they bring them effectively into play to settle fights among themselves.

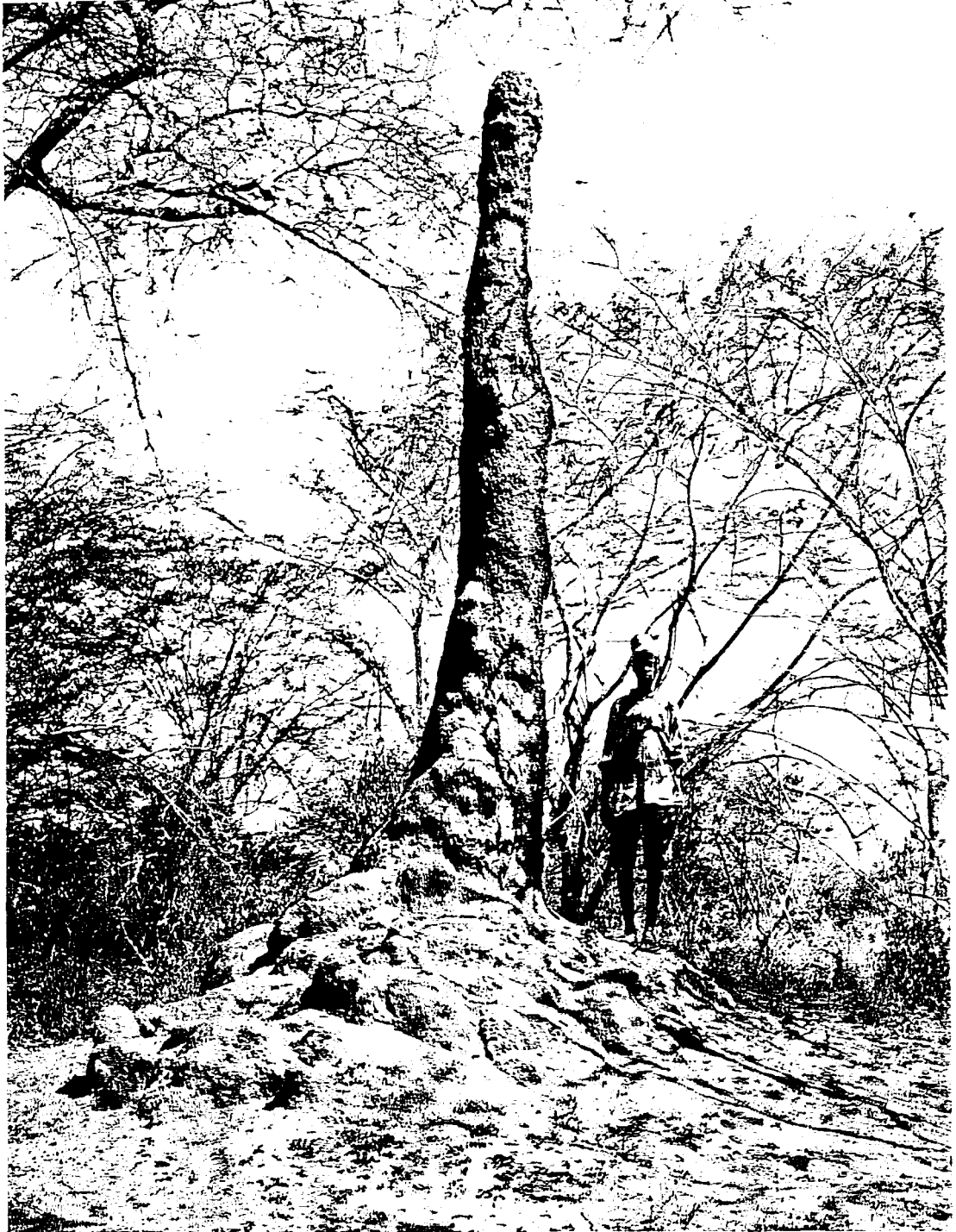
the throng of our frightened porters. About thirty yards away, he suddenly stopped short. Apparently his interest in us lagged, for, turning abruptly, he disappeared at a rapid gait. Some days afterward, south of Lake Baringo, an unlucky porter, his head and shoulders bent down under a load of waterbuck, actually walked right into a rhinoceros. As panic-stricken as the native, the confused beast charged, hurling him high in the air and inflicting a wound in his thigh in addition to a number of contusions. The porter's happiness at having escaped with his life seemed to aid his speedy recovery, for he was able to walk again within a few days.

Lake Baringo is situated in a deep depression, mountains rising on either side to nearly 9,000 feet. Clustered almost in its center is a picturesque group of five islands. The hazy expanse of water is a sight most travelers willingly forego, due to the steaming hot and reputedly unhealthy portions of that part of the country. Romance has ever attached to Lake Hannington, named after the martyred Bishop, but famous also on account of its immense flamingo rookery. At the end of June the young birds are not yet able to fly and the adults

are sufficiently tame to be photographed without a "blind." The din of their honking notes and the swishing of thousands of wings as the whole colony rises into the air is a never-to-be-forgotten performance. It is then that the bright flame-colored patch upon the wings and the strange outline of the whitish body and black pinions form a picture of bewitching loveliness against the hazy blue sky. From the shores lead up the deep pathways of nocturnal, roaring hippopotami. Formerly abundant in the stagnant water of the lake, these "river-horses" are now as scarce as the crocodiles.



On the out-kirts of Mt. Elgon's bamboo brakes at 7000 feet. The density of this maze of stalks increases considerably the higher one proceeds, but as the largest stalks never grow more than about four inches in diameter they can not compare with their Asiatic relatives. Interesting however is their distribution on the few African mountains, where only at certain altitudes do they reach their maximum growth. At the proper seasons elephants frequent these brakes to feed on the asparagus-like shoots.



The tall "sotches" of ant-hills created by termites or "white ants" add much to the typical features of the landscape. These "chimneys" may attain a height of twenty feet above the ground. They are hollow and probably help regulate the amount of moisture in the ant-galleries that lead many feet below the surface of the earth. The many openings at the base often give shelter to a variety of smaller mammals.



A D I K I H A N T I L O P E

On the 1st of July 1905, a dik-dik was shot at the Cape Colony, where it is said to be the most common of the small antelopes which the district has to offer.



H I W H I S T I C O D I D

The dik-dik is a small antelope which was first described by the English naturalist, Thomas Pennant, in 1771. It is a rabbit-like animal, and is said to be the most common of the small antelopes which the district has to offer.



THIS BEAUTIFUL LAKE IS FAMOUS FOR ITS FLAMINGO FLOCKS

Reminiscent of the great lakes of the East, this lake has a wide expanse of water, and is a beautiful sight to behold. The scarlet path of the flamingo is a sight to behold, and the beauty of the scene is enhanced by the presence of these banking birds.



ONE OF MOUNT ELGON'S NUMEROUS CASCADES

Innumerable large and small cascades gushing from the top of sheer precipices have contributed much to the formation of caves on Mt. Elgon. The moisture encourages a relatively luxuriant vegetation which hangs over the cliffs like a heavy drape.

Just south of the lake a number of ostriches amused us by running for a distance parallel with our caravan. At Maji Moto we could not forego the pleasure of resting in a luxuriant gorge where flows a source of clear, hot water, also a reminder of the former volcanic condition of these regions.

How sorry we were to see our trip nearing an end, marked by our approach to Nakuru. The landscape changed noticeably as we en-

tered the grassy plains along the Molo River. Many farms have been established there in recent years. Thus almost under the equator, and on the very edge of the more arid and desert stretches a new civilization is being built up. May its members in this wilderness use their undaunted courage to help preserve intact for generations to come the glorious wild animal life of at least the region outside of what has proved to be the white man's country!