

# *The Game of The Aliab Valley*

By J. V. SUTCLIFFE.

During a survey of the Aliab Valley by the Jonglei Investigation Team, I spent four months—from January to May 1951—in this interesting but little-frequented area. This opportunity may, I hope, in spite of my slight knowledge of game, excuse a note on the area.

The Aliab Valley is the name given to the low lying flood basin on the west of the Bahr-el-Gebel between Tombe in the south, on the border between Equatoria and Bahr-el-Ghazal provinces, and Lake Papiu in the north. The area covered by the survey was the southern half of the valley, from Tombe north to opposite Bor, a distance of about thirty miles.

To the east of the valley, and well above it, flows the Bahr-el-Gebel; the ground slopes away from its high banks, remains more or less level across the toich or the floor of the valley, which varies in width from  $2\frac{1}{2}$  to 6 miles, and then rises steeply into thick forest on the west.

From Tombe, along the edge of the forest to Yelakot there is no road, but a survey line was cleared. The road north from Tombe swings west to cross Khor Gwir, then comes out again to the edge of the forest at Wunakot; from here it runs to Minkaman—where a road branches off west to Pap and Yirol—and beyond it to the north. Between Wunakot and Minkaman there is no steep bank between forest and toich, and the one merges into the other. North of Minkaman the forest gives place to thick bush, but the bank reappears.

As the Bahr-el-Gebel rises (usually in June) it overflows its banks and floods the whole valley, which is transformed into a vast swamp. When the river falls again below its banks, it ceases to spill except through a few *chor* channels; the valley then begins to drain towards the north. This may begin early or late according to the year, but the south of the valley dries out first, while the north is permanently flooded.

As I was there in a low year, the southern end of the valley was dry by February, except for a pool near Tombe and the River Aliab itself, which held water in deep pools. Opposite Bor, on the other hand, the centre of the valley was covered by a large open lake, about two miles wide and stretching roughly north and south, which was fringed with a wide belt of papyrus swamp.

Between the two there remained, throughout the dry season, both water and good grazing. The toich, which was burnt at the end of January, was soon covered with young green grass; every depression remained full of water. There are many of these depressions, or *khors*, running across the toich parallel to the Bahr-el-Gebel and those with very thick grass growing in the water, make movement difficult. Though it is sometimes possible to cross by walking on top of the mat of grasses, it was generally found to be necessary to cross on hand and knees; the grass, though sinking, is then able to support one's weight! Thus for most game, only the fringe of the toich is accessible.

In December or January the Dinka bring their cattle to this grazing, their camps being most concentrated in this central region. In the same way, a large amount of game migrates to the Aliab toiches during the dry season in search of water and grazing. Thus, between the months of December and April, the western edge of the valley contains a vast quantity of game, which, generally speaking, spends the day in the forest and comes out at night to the toich to drink and graze.

By far the most numerous of all game were buffalo, many large herds of which covered the whole area. Between Wunakot and Minkaman, for instance, over about two miles of road, at least three herds of about two hundred each went into the toich after dark, re-entering the forest about dawn. They could often be seen grazing quietly beside the road well after dawn; indeed, on one occasion, three buffalo lumbered at noon straight through a large survey party working on the road. I believe that there were about three thousand buffalo between Tombe and Fadunyieli, just opposite Bor, either in large herds or in small groups of bulls; this includes red or forest buffalo which are found north of Tombe.

Some Dinka hunt buffalo, choosing a moonlit night to catch them on the open toich, and occasionally the Bari try to hunt them with bows and arrows, but they seem to live happily together. One Dinka, whose hut was within five yards of a well worn track, said that he watched a herd pass him every morning at dawn. One man was killed by a cow while we were there, but Mahmoud Eff. Abu Sineina who found and shot the culprit, found that it had been wounded by a spear, and was little more than a skeleton.

It is said that fights occur between the herd bulls of the buffalo and of the Dinka cattle ; I photographed a dark grey animal, with long horizontal horns curved slightly upwards at the tips, which I found with a herd of cattle, and which was, I was assured, a cross between a cow and buffalo.

Nearly as numerous were tiang, which could be seen grazing east of the road between Wunakot and Minkaman at all times except noon, and they were often to be seen grazing among the Dinka cattle. At the end of January there was one enormous herd of nearly a thousand, but this gradually split up for breeding. By March there were two or three herds, the largest being about two hundred which grazed in the open parklike fringe of the forest north of Wunakot ; many small groups of about eight, made up of one or two bulls, four cows, and calves, remained further out in the toich, one watching from an anthill while the others grazed. Where, elsewhere, the forest descended steeply to the toich, no tiang were to be seen.

Waterbuck, in small groups, were to be found on the fringes of the thicker forest. There was a herd of roan antelope west of Minkaman, but only one was seen in the Aliab proper. Reedbuck, in groups of four to five, were often distributed among the thick grass and anthills on the fringe of the toich. and north of Minkaman in the bush overlooking the toich. Bushbuck were sometimes seen, usually singly, on the edge of the thicker forest.

Mrs. Gray's lechwe, which have not, I believe, been confirmed in this area, were sighted on several occasions. I myself only saw them once, at the end of April (near the Bahr-el-Gebel opposite Wunakot). I watched through my glasses a herd of one very large bull, one medium bull, six cows and several calves, walking stiffly about two hundred yards from me. Mahmoud Eff., however, also saw a larger herd in the swamplier area north of Lake Barnyieu.

Elephants were fairly numerous, particularly after the rains had begun, in March and April. Mahmoud Eff. shot a hundred pounder near Panabang, as well as a sixty-eight-pounder and a seventy-five pounder. One herd of about forty used to drink every night in Lake Dijir, returning to the forest to the west. Several times smaller groups were seen on the toich itself, in the wetter areas with thick green grass. Twice, in January, at the extreme southern end of the valley, a leveling party had to retreat hurriedly when a bull took an interest in their activities.

At the end of April, after we had watched two elephants pass safely out of sight, we were baling out a six-foot hole, before taking soil samples from it ; when suddenly a third bull, which was being hunted and had been speared by Dinka, charged trumpeting at the hole through the eight-foot high grass. After a flight, in which kit

and shoes were left scattered along the cleared survey line, we escaped across a deep *khor* which providence had placed not too far away. Meanwhile, the Nuer labourer who was in the hole when the elephant appeared, ducked into the water at the bottom and had to watch helplessly as the elephant passed over him ; one foot descended into the hole and was drawn up again as it felt the lack of footing ! After this he jumped out and ran the whole way back to camp, about seven miles away !

The Dinka were most ashamed of the elephant, which they said was a coward, running about instead of turning to fight ; they eventually killed it when it tried to cross the *khor* over which we had taken refuge.

Rhinoceros were to be found in the forest ; though I did not see them myself, other members of the party did. I saw a very handsome club, carried by a proud Dinka, made out of rhinoceros horn.

Giraffe were seen on the edge of the *toich* especially at the end of the dry season.

Warthog, singly or in small groups, were often disturbed by day in the more open parts of the forest.

Lion were common at the southern end of the valley, where they took cattle from the Dinka camps, and kept us awake at night, coming to roar as close as fifteen yards from the camp. Leopard were found near Tombe and Panabang, while civet cat were also seen. Hyena were extremely common, especially in the open bush north-west of Minkaman.

Hippo frequent not only the main river, but also all the lakes and deep *khors* throughout the area. They were especially plentiful in Lake Barnieu, where many were always in sight, lying lazily in the deeper channels. The Dinka hunt them for their meat and skin, but, although we saw one man who had lost an arm through one, and heard from fishermen how they liked to upset their canoes, we found them little trouble. Once in the Bahr-el-Gebel, our motorboat was chased by one which came to within five yards before I found that I had some speed in reserve ; but that was a female with young. Before that, while we were on our way to do some soundings, a crocodile had hit our propeller, and we had to change the pin within eighty yards of a herd of about thirty hippo ; but, apart from one who stationed himself between us and the herd, they seemed quite unconcerned. . . . . Crocodiles, on the other hand, were a

nuisance. Most large khors contained them, and, although the fact that we went about in large parties prevented any accident, it was not pleasant to hear, while floundering through five feet of water, that "it was just here that a Dinka lost a leg last week." The Dinka lose a lot of cattle through them, and were always asking us to shoot them. During the dry season they are mainly concentrated along the Bahrel-Gebel especially where a khor joins the main river. In one such spot, in the Tombe Channel, about a hundred were to be seen. During the rains, they move away from the river to the khors.

Fish were extremely plentiful in most khors and in the main river; detailed statistics of catches have been given to Dr. Sandon but the most common of about sixteen varieties found were Bulti, Nok and Garmut. The Dinka, because of their contempt for the professional fisherman, do not take full advantage of this resource relying on chance spearing or occasional mass spearing when khors are sufficiently low.

Guinea fowl were very plentiful, especially in the more open bush, while whistling teal and geese frequent most pools, and stretches of open water.

As soon as the rains began, this year in the middle of March, and there was fresh grass growth in the forest, the amount of game in the valley quickly diminished. The buffalo, especially, retired to grazing grounds in the forest, though some still remained at the end of April. Thus there are two sets of migrations. Buffalo come to the toich when it begins to dry and when inland water and grazing are not available, and return inland as soon as rains begin. Elephant on the other hand, and Mrs. Gray's Lechwe, retire to the wetter area to the north when the grass is burnt, and return to the south as the rains produce fresh strong growth.

#### EDITORS NOTE.

There are red buffalo mixed with the black all over the southern Sudan. It is improbable that they are a separate forest species.