

IN HAUNTS OF WILD GAME

A HUNTER-NATURALIST'S WANDERINGS
FROM KAHLAMBA TO LIBOMBO

BY

FREDERICK VAUGHAN KIRBY, F.Z.S.
(MAQAQAMBA)

*WITH A PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR
NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. WHYMPER
AND A MAP*

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further insight into her mysteries, she is ever ready to assist; the very charm of her outward beauty courts deeper admiration and invites inquiry. With her we sail her oceans, we climb her mountains, we cross her rivers, we tread her forests, and at every step we learn and love more, for the Unknown has become Known, and the Dark, Light. Turn we now back particularly to that page of the book which demands our special attention.

Rich in vegetation of bewildering variety, and teeming with animal life as it unquestionably is, yet the serpent is hidden amongst its blossoms; for its reed-margined rivers—flowing through dense groves of impala-bush, and whose still pools are white and purple with water-lilies, and scattered over with the golden drops of the acacia blossoms—its flower-studded dells, its grassy ridges, all those spots which are most charming to the eye,—

“Where the tints of the earth and the hues of the sky,
In colour though varied, in beauty may vie,”—

over each and all of these the deadly malarial fever in its worst form casts its devastating arms, many in number as those of the fabled Briareus. Yet still we who are sportsmen love it with all its faults, for is it not the home of the big game? As we cross its sandy ridges and walk along the bush-fringed crocodile-haunted river-banks, we are listening to Nature speaking to us; every sign we see is, as it were, her voice helping and instructing us. The bark-stripped trees, the muddy pathway through broken reeds and river-borne *débris*, the down-trodden grass, the drag along yon dry river-bed, the blood-stained herbage, and the myriads of buzzing flies, tell their own tale; the spoor of the startled sable antelope in the soft sandy soil, flying from that dark, tangled, and evil-smelling thicket on the other side; the signs of struggle upon the edge of the deep, dark pool; the cropped shoots of the “wait-a-bit” thorns, and sprays of the table-topped acaciæ,—these are all voices of Nature; words, pages, and chapters of her book, keenly studied and devoured by her devotees.

The game of the country of which I write is still varied and fairly numerous, though of late years the destruction of the South African fauna has been very great; and we who have

known the country in its earlier days can but look back with feelings of deep regret for what has been, and forward with concern to what may be. It must be borne in mind that many of the animals now to be found only in the "fly"-infested tracts of the bush-veldt along the course of the Sabi, Oliphants, Limpopo, and Singwetsi rivers at one time, well within my own recollection, existed in large numbers in the more broken country amongst the foothills of the mountain-range; amongst those which have thus retreated to safer haunts being buffalo, rhinoceros, giraffe, eland, and roan antelope. I can well remember hunting the black rhinoceros in places where now one might walk or ride for hours without turning out so much as a reedbuck. There are still a fair number of koodoo, waterbuck, wildebeeste, Burchell's zebra, and a few sable antelope to be found more or less near to the skirts of civilisation, wherever certain natural advantages have proved favourable to their remaining; but they are appreciably diminishing in numbers every year. Nowadays the highest plateaux of the range (the krantz country) afford shelter to many of the smaller antelopes; reedbuck, oribi, and duiker on the open flats and ridges; mountain reedbuck and vaal rhé buck on the hills and krantzes; bushbuck, 'msumbi (the red or bush duiker), and bush-pigs in the kloofs and small patches of bush; leopards and cheeta still lurk about the kloofs and krantzes; and the "aard-wolf," African foxes, and ant-bear are numerous.

Amongst the foothills (the kloof country) we leave behind us the mountain reedbuck; the oribi and vaal rhé buck are met with sparingly on the stretches of open grass-land; but here is the true home of the hill leopard, while cheeta are plentiful, and the great spotted hyæna not unfrequently met with. Hunting-dogs and serval are common; the civet and ratel, though numerous, are seldom seen; koodoo in the hills, buffalo in the dense kloofs, and bush-pig everywhere; while all the smaller antelopes, with the exception of those mentioned as peculiar to the terracelands, are very numerous. Bushbuck and 'msumbi especially, swarm in all the dense heavily-wooded kloofs; and klipspringers in the krantzes and kopjes.

Then as we proceed farther east we find the long, gaunt, pale-coloured leopard of the Low Country proper, with many inter-

mediate forms; all the smaller antelopes are still met with in numbers, with the exception of the 'msumbi, which is very rare, being only seen in the densely-wooded tracts close to water. Eland, sable antelope, roan antelope, koodoo, waterbuck, sassaby, blue wildebeeste, impala, reedbuck, duiker, steinbuck, and rarely the grys-steinbuck, are the antelopes of the Low Country.

Eland and roan antelope are very scarce indeed, a small tract of country between the Oliphants and Limpopo rivers being about the only place where small troops can be still found.

As lately as five years ago there were elephants on the Timbati, a herd of over fifty head being encountered by some Boer hunters: they come from the extensive reed-beds at the junction of the Letaba and Oliphants rivers, though they still exist in the dense bush on the Libombo slopes.

Both species of rhinoceros are now practically extinct, the square-mouthed being altogether so,¹ though a few of the prehensile-lipped species remain in the Libombo and the Matamiri bush on the lower Sabi.

Buffalo and hippopotami are to be found; giraffe, ostrich, and Burchell's zebra still plentiful; lions everywhere along the courses of the principal rivers, also grey and red foxes and black-backed jackals, spotted hyæna, and cheeta; the bush-pig is very rare in the Low Country, but the wart-hog supplies its place, and is most plentiful; serval, and two smaller species of the Felidæ—the *impaka* and *imbodhla* of the natives—are found. The latter cat bears much resemblance to the impaka, but is longer in body and shorter in tail, and with fewer brindlings upon a slightly warmer ground colour.

The disappearance of the game is not solely attributable to its extermination by the rifle; the advance of civilisation has driven it back, and caused it to retire from those parts where it was constantly hunted on horseback, and take refuge in the "fly"-infested districts, where horses and other domestic animals cannot live. In these secure retreats it is seldom molested: the "fly" has

¹ For many years past the well-known Matamiri bush, lying along the south bank of the Sabi river, has been a favourite resort of *Rhinoceros simus*, but they have become almost extinct now even there. This year (1895) I came upon two in that district, a cow and big calf; but they are decidedly rare. The Matamiri bush, however, does not come within the district which I seek to describe, though separated from its southern boundary only by the Sabi river.

done more for the preservation of the game than all the game-laws ever framed. Fever, in its worst form, is rife throughout the summer months, and is another and almost equally important factor in the preservation of the big game from utter annihilation.

Such is the country at the present day ; and though it will be seen that it is all old ground over which we propose to travel, yet even old ground may come to possess new interest according as it is viewed by different eyes and judged by different standards, for of the hunting country it may truly be said, "semper aliquid novi."

It has seemed advisable, for several reasons, in the present work, to separate the series,—bringing together, in the first part, those chapters descriptive of the pursuit of game amongst the broken foothills of the mountain-ranges, the country of krantz and kloof; and combining in the second portion of the work those which deal more immediately with the larger fauna of the "bush-veldt," "hunting-veldt," or Low Country, as it is variously termed.

It is perhaps needless to remark that no such arbitrary division actually exists, as the foregoing brief description of the country and its fauna will sufficiently show; most of the smaller antelopes, the koodoo amongst the larger, and the leopard and buffalo, being common to both portions of the district.

Having now obtained a fair idea of what the country is like through which we intend to hunt, we will get the oxen up, inspan, and trek.

in small herds of four or five to ten in number. A troop consisting entirely of bulls, old and young, is not uncommon. They are partial to rough stony hills covered with dense bush, but are equally plentiful along the banks of the streams and rivers of the Low Country, wherever the bush is thick enough to afford them cover. The leaves and young shoots of many astringent shrubs and trees, as well as wild fruit (they are particularly fond of the acid *'mganu*), form an important item in their food. As a rule the bulls, though their powers of leaping are enormous, run neither fast nor far; but individuals differ, and I have more than once been "left in the lurch" by a good koodoo bull. The cows, on the contrary, run with great speed and endurance. An average bull will stand 4 feet 9 or 10 inches at the shoulder; a cow 4 feet 6 inches. Their flesh is quite equal to that of other antelopes.

ELAND (*Oreas canna*). *Eland* of the Boers; *Impofu* of the Swazis and Zulus; *Pofu* of the Basuto.—This, the largest of antelopes, can no longer be reckoned amongst the game of this district, where once it was plentiful. A few individuals still remain, but they are stringently protected by law. The average shoulder height of a bull is 5 feet 6 inches.

BUFFALO (*Bos caffer*). *Buffel* of the Boers; *Inyati* of Swazis and Zulus; *Nari* of the Basuto.—Now almost extinct, except in the dense, heavily-wooded kloofs of the foothills. In 1885 they were fairly numerous along the Oliphants and Timbabati rivers, and as late as 1890 I saw a few on the Swinya, and wounded a very fine bull: my horse bolted, however, so I did not secure him, but he was found dead by another hunting-party. The average width of the horns inside the bend at the widest part is about 35 inches. A good bull stands 4 feet 10 inches at the shoulder; one monster I shot on the Zambesi taped 5 feet, full.

BURCHELL'S ZEBRA (*Equus burchelli*). *Quagga* of the Boers; *Idube* of the Swazis and Zulus; *Makwa* of the Basuto.—Plentiful throughout the Low Country east of long. 31°, and are seen as frequently in thick thorn-bush as on the more open ridges. They herd together in troops of from ten to sixty individuals,

though upon occasions I have seen far more together. They are usually in company with other game—giraffe, wildebeeste, sassy, or ostriches. In the same troop individuals will show very great variation in their markings, the typical animals striped only to the hocks being far less frequently observed than the aberrant form striped to the hoofs. They stand 13 hands at the withers.

BLACK RHINOCEROS (*Rhinoceros bicornis*). *Rhenoster* of the Boers; *Upejana* of the Swazis and Zulus; *Upelepe* of the Basuto.—Now only to be found in the dense bush on the Libombo slopes, and here and there along the Lower Sabi. A few years ago it was not uncommon to the south of the Sabi and amongst the stony hills toward the Krokodile Poort. I believe the last existing specimen in the bush country to the west of the Libombo and north of the Sabi was shot on the Manunga river, close to my old "Rhino camp," in 1891. With the exception of perhaps three or four individuals still lingering in the Matamiri bush to the south of the Sabi, the square-mouthed rhinoceros (*R. simus*) is also extinct in this district.

HYRAX (*Hyrax capensis*). *Klip-das* of the Boers; *Rock-rabbit* of colonists generally; *Imbila* of the Swazis and Zulus; *Ipila* of the Basuto.—Plentiful everywhere along the mountain-ranges and in the kloofs. The flesh is eaten by the natives, but is coarse and strong.

GROUND-PIG (*Aulacodus swindernianus*). *Riet-muis* (Reed-mouse) of the Boers; *Ivondwe* of the Swazis and Zulus; *Ikwilira* of the Basuto.—Common throughout along the banks of streams and in the kloof. Much amusement can be obtained by hunting them with dogs. The flesh is white and of good flavour, being particularly tasty if boiled and eaten cold.

PORCUPINE (*Hystrix cristata*). *Ijzer-vark* of the Boers; *Injelwane* and *Inungu* of Swazis and Zulus; *Nunku* of the Basuto.—Plentiful everywhere. They do much damage amongst the pumpkin and sweet-potato plantations of the natives, and also amongst one's favourite dogs if they chance to be run into.



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THE END.









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