

"A buffalo bull with a snare embedded in its neck had to be shot near the main road to Kasenyi. The animal, which had been suffering grievously, was a serious menace to the neighbourhood."

*(Director of National Parks, Quarterly Report June 1960.)*

"Poaching by means of wire snares around waterholes and salt licks was heavy and many animals had to be destroyed having been caught in them, including eleven buffalo."

*(Game Ranger, Gulu, Monthly Report, January 1961.)*

"The poachers having killed all the meat they could transport, had returned to their homes to sell, barter or otherwise dispose of it. After a period of a week or so the gang returned to visit their snares, but by this time many animals had been caught and had already died miserably, providing food only for the hyaenas and vultures. On one safari alone I found nine dead animals thus wasted, ranging from a young elephant to a buffalo."

*(Game Ranger, Gulu, Monthly Report.)*

"It has been necessary to destroy one elephant, three buffalo and four hippo, all carrying snares which had cut so deeply into the flesh that gangrene had set in."

*(Director of National Parks, Quarterly Report, September 1960.)*

Unless its use is stopped the wire snare will ultimately exterminate Uganda's remaining wildlife, so that nothing will be left for the legitimate hunter. In the process it will inevitably result in the death or injury of many innocent people. The continued use of such a barbarous instrument of torture is surely a grave reflection on any country which regards itself as civilized.

**YOU** can do something to prevent this slaughter ;

- If you are a hunter collect any snares you may find and hand them to the nearest Game Ranger. You can claim a reward for each snare handed in.
- If you use steel wire rope in the course of your work see that it is not left about so that it can be stolen and misused. Ensure that discarded lengths are destroyed or dumped in rivers or lakes where they cannot be recovered.
- If you are a shopkeeper or trader in a rural area refuse to supply wire rope unless you are satisfied that it is required for legitimate purposes.
- If you know of people who are snaring game see that they are reported. Remember that they are wantonly destroying one of Uganda's most valuable assets, that they are deliberately causing immense cruelty and suffering to innocent animals, and that their activities could result in the death or injury of yourself or one of your family.

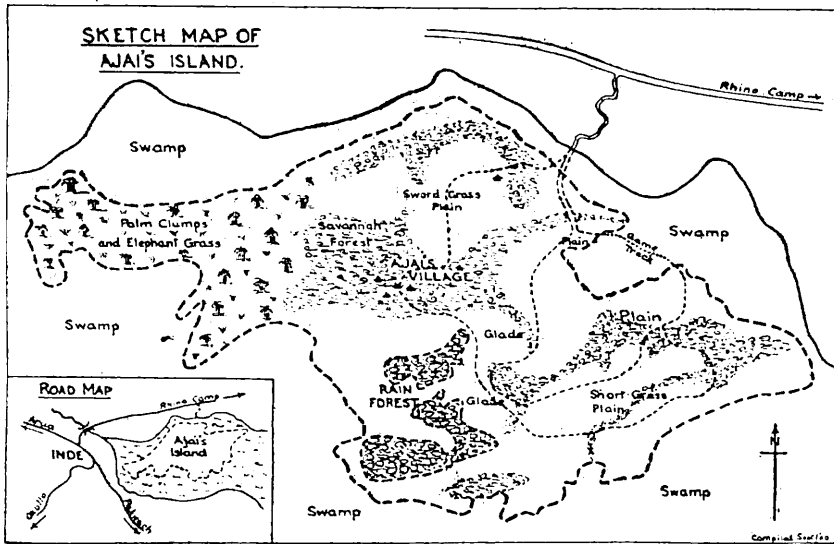
**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR.** Letters concerning any aspect of wild life—whether big game, fish or insects—are welcomed and should be sent to the Editor at P. O. Box 142, Kampala. Much has still to be learnt about Uganda's natural history, and the amateur observer can play as important a part as the professional naturalist or zoologist in adding to our present knowledge.

# Ajai's Island

*Dr. E. H. Williams describes one of the main strongholds of the rare white rhinoceros in West Nile District*

ABOUT the year 1917 there was a young man of considerable strength of character belonging to the southern Madi tribe who strongly objected to the advent of the first District Commissioner of the Uganda Government, and attempted on a few occasions to kill him with his bow and arrow. With commendable diplomacy, the D.C. is said to have sent a message to this young man promising him that he would make him the chief of his tribe if he would desist from firing arrows at him in future. At the installation of the young man, whose name was Ajai, he was asked if the tribe had any particular greeting of its own, and when the reply was given as 'No'; the D.C. raised his hand above his head and suggested 'Ma de'.

I arrived in the West Nile District in 1941 and met Chief Ajai about two days later, and was greeted with the upstretched arm and 'Ma de'. In 1941, Ajai was a striking figure of a man, for he was heavily built and stood well over six feet. He also had an enormous "wen" the size of a cricket ball on the side of his face, and my first surgical operation performed in the District was to remove this sebaceous cyst. Ajai remained a close personal friend until his death in 1953, but at that time I knew nothing about Ajai's island as it was then remote from any roads.



In 1954, in the course of some hunts, I first visited Ajai's island but without realising that it was either an island or anything to do with Ajai. Since that time I have hunted on the island regularly every year. In fact, it seemed always a sure place to get a good bag and, as I have explored it, its several unique characteristics have gradually dawned upon me and each of these perhaps deserves a separate paragraph.

Just south of Rhino Camp, two big rivers flow into the Nile through large swamps which become confluent before reaching the Nile. The rivers are called the Ala and Aca and they flow from the highlands, 2,000 feet and more above the level of the Nile and about 25 miles from it. In these swamps there are a number of islands of which probably the largest is Ajai's island in the Ala swamp. This island has been formed by the deposition of soil brought down from the highlands and is about 1 mile wide and 3 or 4 miles long. As one envisages the building up of the island from its present structure one can see that it has produced in cross-section the variety of vegetation and soils found in the highlands. The eastern part of the island was first deposited and is sandy with slightly raised areas covered with typical savannah forest, these areas threaded as it were between sandy plains covered with short grass. This short grass is important because it is favoured by white rhinoceros. Coming further west the savannah forest gets thicker, but there is one open plain covered with 'sword' grass, which does not grow anywhere else nearer than the highlands. The soil and seeds have come from the highlands, and this is excellent land for cultivation. In fact, it is where Chief Ajai had his gardens of millet and beans. At the waist of the island there is a patch about 200 acres in extent of thick rain forest, of which remnants exist in the valleys in the highlands. Finally, further west still, the island is covered with dense elephant grass and clumps of wild date palms.

So much for the vegetation and now we come to evidence of Ajai's residence there. About half a mile north of the forested area there are well-baked remains of several houses which were probably burned down at the time of Ajai's death. Most noteworthy are the earthen beds raised about a foot above ground, now a brick red in colour from the firing. Among these remains are a few mango trees, very concrete evidence of man's residence, and one very large wild fig tree, which I am told covers the grave of Ajai's father or grandfather. All around this area are scattered many potsherds. There are no elephants in the area today, but I feel sure that Ajai, who owned a double-barrelled .450 which I have seen, shot elephants around here. I remember years ago, his giving me a lesson on where to shoot an elephant, illustrated by excellent sketches in the dust of the road.

Regarding the presence of elephants in this area in the past, the Report of the Game Department for 1933 is interesting. Mr. F. G. Banks who 25 years previously had poached in the Lado Enclave, re-visited the area as Game Ranger "to direct a very necessary campaign to reduce elephant numbers" in the area west and south of Rhino Camp in which is situated Ajai's Island. Mr. Banks reported "In the old days elephants were numerous, various herds totalling perhaps 1,500 head in the country west of Rhino Camp. When the motor road from Rhino Camp to



**White Rhino on Ajai's Island. The white rhinoceros is the second largest land mammal in the world. A good bull will stand 6ft. 6 in. at the shoulder and weigh up to 3 tons (photo by Dr. E. H. Williams).**

Arua was constructed (1925) some moved north, but the majority moved south to the Ala and Ora rivers." The heavy control shooting resulted in the death of 328 elephant between January and March at an expenditure of 2.45 rounds of ammunition per elephant. Another 122 elephant were shot by Game Guards in the area during the year. I wonder how many of these elephant were shot on Ajai's island?

This island is a strategic bridge for game of all kinds. I have found that game travelling from north to south or vice-versa invariably route across the island. There are always many trails going right across the island. By the way, I should point out that the area conforms to the definition of an island ("an area of land surrounded by water") only from June until January inclusive every year. In the earlier months of the year, the swamp dries up and the island can be reached dry shod. But the months when it is an island, practically inaccessible and except for the plains I have mentioned, covered with high dense grass this is a wonderful game refuge and many times I have been on the island and could hear rhino, buffalo, and other game around me without being able to see any. Then too, because it is a natural refuge it is the favourite breeding place of the game in the area. This is particularly true of the white rhino. I have seen more young rhino on the island than anywhere else. In my opinion this island and many other smaller ones in this swamp and others along the Nile are the last hope of the game in the area for breeding purposes. I wish they could be made safe for game, not only by water and vegetation from June to January but by law from February to May also.

What can one expect to see if one visits the island? Is it easy to

There is usually a small herd of Uganda cob on the island and some years ago an albino was seen several times. Bush-buck tripping across the glades are a familiar sight, and oribi and hartebeeste are seen during the drier months. Waterbuck are very common especially after heavy rain and on cloudy days. Buffalo are not often seen in the day and afternoon. They hide up in the forest or denser vegetation on the west of the island. I have had occasion to follow wounded buffalo into these areas and I cannot recommend the experience for peace of mind or dreamless nights afterwards. Warthog and baboon are common. In the forest there is often to be seen a troop of black and white colobus monkeys swinging through the trees. I have seen leopard, and have several times come across lion tracks, but I have not seen any lion. I can never remember going on the island without seeing some game, not in large numbers but certainly in ideal surroundings for close observation.

As can be judged from the earlier description of the vegetation, bird life is profuse and any ornithologist can be sure of plenty of interest in a short visit to the island. Earlier this year when I burned the grass off the island in the dry season I was surrounded by scores of carmine and European bee-eaters, flashing their beautiful colours as they swooped down upon the insects escaping from the flames. The stately Goliath heron is frequently seen stalking across the plains. Many plovers, storks, cranes, fish eagles, hawks, vultures and once an osprey, are seen. The forested area resounds with different bird calls at suitable times of the day.

From the island can be seen the escarpment the other side of the Nile, and a rocky hill just to the south of the island. The island is not the only place to visit in this vicinity or the only place to see white rhino. There are probably about 45 of these rare animals in the immediate area and the different families usually stay around their own particular localities. One day, we encountered a rhino which had fouled a snare and the whole ponderous snout was fractured. The animal was in terrible distress, so leaving my brother to track it, I tore off to Arua to get the D.C.'s permission to shoot the animal. The D.C. came out with me and all together we put the beast out of its pain. We then attempted a post mortem and carried away various specimens in formalin in some jam jars borrowed from my wife. On another occasion, I was enquiring after any rhino skulls lying around and was led by the local Game Guard to where a rhino, which had been speared by poachers, had been buried in the sandy soil six months previously. It was still pretty high and we hung the skull on the back of the car while we drove home at top speed, leaving the smell behind us. But we came back later and succeeded in collecting the whole skeleton with the exception of part of one hind leg which was probably taken by a hyaena. This skeleton we cleaned up; it was in perfect condition, and I took it home to Professor Cave in England for investigation. The skull incidentally weighed 54 lb.

**FOOTNOTE--**Chief Ajai was not buried on the island, but at the headquarters of his clan on the nearby Ogoko peninsula which runs between the Ala and Aca rivers. He is reputed to have had 80 wives and so has many sons and daughters who survive him, and approve of the island named after Ajai as a memorial to a great chief.

to get to? What time of day should it be visited? Arua, the capital of the West Nile, is about 30 miles away. It is best to leave Arua at about 2.30 p.m. driving to Inde cross roads, there contacting a Game Guard or local guide and proceeding along the Rhino Camp road from Inde to the track, passable to all types of cars, which winds through the trees for about 400 yards to the edge of the swamp area. From there one must walk, and be prepared for wet feet if in December, January, June or July. A visit is quite impracticable from August to November inclusive. Clothes too are important if the visitor wants to get close to a rhino and photograph it; drab nondescript colours, dirty old hats and low-heeled walking shoes are essential to get the best out of what can be a most interesting walk. There are two main routes round the scenic portion of the island, one taking about an hour and the other about two hours. These are indicated on the sketch map. It is important to notice wind direction before starting, and this determines which way round one goes. Once you get on the island you will get the atmosphere of the place which is one of real remoteness from the "madding crowd".

First and foremost of the game everyone wants to see is the white rhino. It is seldom that I have visited the island without seeing rhino and I have often seen groups of between 10 and 15, especially in the months of April and May. After four o'clock in the afternoon these tend to browse peacefully on one of the three largest plains covered with short grass, and frequently it is possible to get very close to them under cover of the savannah forest verges of the plains, for they are not classed among the more dangerous animals. In spite of their docility, however, they are most difficult to photograph because they run away at the slightest noise, such as the click of a camera shutter; not however, before turning to face the intruder with two big ears cocked to catch any further sound. This is the moment when the visitor familiar with traditional rhino lore thinks he is going to be charged, and a white rhino at 30 feet is a very big animal and remarkably light on his feet. The inexperienced at this moment often noisily quail and off goes the rhino. If one stands quite still without any noise, however, the animal will sometimes resume browsing.

The impression that the white rhino seems to give most people is of extreme ugliness and size. A fully-grown specimen is the height of the average door lintel at the shoulder. He is not white, of course, except when he has been rolling in white sand, but may be grey, red or black according to the texture of his latest mud bath. His tail hangs straight down until he is alarmed and then curls up into a spiral. When alarmed the rhino runs off breathing heavily in an asthmatic fashion and I have even heard him squeal with surprise or fear. The only other sound I have heard one make is a ferocious bellow and this seems to be either a noise of warning to other rhinos or a challenge between two males. I have never seen a fight, but once saw a large male rhino toss a young one as big as a pig several feet into the air with his horn. The young one came down with a bump, somewhat dazed and of a mind to keep away from the old man, judging by the speed of his retreat. The white rhino is very family minded and often in close vicinity one finds father, mother, elder brother and younger sister. Father always leaves the scene last of all. Mother drives off tiny with the point of her horn butting it behind to make it go faster.