



THE AFRICAN RHINOCEROS.

by "farms" or uplands of short turf, of not more than a quarter of a mile in breadth. When the snipe are driven from one dhoon, they jump to the intervening tarn and settle in the neighbouring one, where the sportsman finds them when he has walked down the length of the first series of fields, and so on, till he has had enough of it. In the muzzle-loading era it was usual to have two double barrels in use, one being washed out at a convenient pool as soon as thoroughly fouled, while the other was blazing away. But indeed some keen shots never took the trouble to load a gun at all, simply banging them off as fast as they were presented, ready charged, by the attendants—like the Spanish soldiers at Saragossa, or ladies gudgeon fishing in kid gloves, who touch not the worm, nor even the "scaly prey" they capture—"nasty slippery thing!"

In the flat country of Bengal the fields are spread in wide patches of two or three square miles area, all separated by a network of "bunds" or "anks" into spaces of an acre or two, the horizon being bounded by thick groves of mango and jack trees, plantains, and banboos, in which are buried the villages. These fields remain marshy and wet in some places all through the hot dry summer, and when snipe shooting begins, are often as difficult to cross as the rice swamps of Burma. In the upper provinces of India I have never had snipe shooting, and cannot speak topographically of it there. In the Valley of Kaulamandoo, in Nepal, these birds are also to be found in rice fields, particularly those at the foot of the surrounding hills, and irrigated by the streams trickling from them. Finally, both in India and Burma (particularly Tenasserim) snipe are to be met with late in the season, solitary or in pairs, in dry bushy places in the skirts of jungles. I have shot them, on the Salween river, on the high pebbly beach of a rocky islet.

I never in my life met with so many snipe in one place as at a village in Bengal named Booter, two or three miles on the east or Calcutta side of Bankoor, being just a hundred miles from the City of Palaces itself. The country here just begins to rise out of the alluvium, and the muddy paddies are interspersed with islets of laterite, little clumps of jujube or "baer" bushes, and patches of boggy ground with tiny rills of water flowing through them. In this place I remember the birds would begin to rise ere I had well descended from my horse; on arriving at the ground, and before I had placed my first footstep in the wet, a dozen birds might be seen on the wing. At every stop it was "Chuk, chuk, chuk," before, behind, to right, to left, a flutter-r-r of wings at each well-known note, and a fine fat fellow shooting through the air with his long bill straight before him. We shot over the ground during the heat of the day from 10 a.m. till 2 p.m., then a little tiffin, and at it again from 3 till too dark to see any more; and fifty couple of birds to each gun was not an unusual bag. The best time is in the greatest heat of the day, for the birds are then lay, get up from near your feet, flying sometimes quite leisurely, and plunging down again within fifty yards or so. A sportsman fresh from the wintry fens of Lincolnshire, where the snipe starts from the ruzky over thirty or forty yards off, and in two or three swift zig-zags is out of shot, would hardly recognise the same bird fluttering from the tepid waters of a Bengal marsh.

I have frequently, after knocking down every bird in a certain patch of ground, on returning over the same place two or three hours afterwards, found several fresh birds scattered about there, as if to replace their defunct brethren; and when evening is deepening, and the dusk hinders further sport, it is a common sight to see snipe come dropping down, as if from the clouds, into the same spots as have been recently shot over. They are then apparently taking up their roosting quarters for the night, for, as with wild fowl, they do not sleep where they feed. On one of these occasions, as I was tramping wearily back to mount my horse and ride home, my gun with one loaded barrel over my shoulder, a snipe settled within shot of me; wishing to discharge my piece, I aimed at the spot where the bird had disappeared in the weeds and stubble, fired, and leisurely walking up, picked up two, lying close to each other. It is probable they nestle close together when roosting. (By-the-by, I am not sure that "roosting" on the ground is a term to be permitted.)

I remember the time when snipe were to be had in the Calcutta market for two pice each (about three farthings). They were exposed on the stalls in heaps, both alive and dead. How the natives catch them in such numbers I do not know. Many are killed, and leisurely walking up, picked up two, lying close to each other. In the Mediterranean islands. They live two or three days sometimes before being consigned to the cook, but are then thin and flavourless.

At Akrah (in Arracan), where snipe swarm towards the close of the rains (August and September), they are often to be seen in the compounds of the houses on the skirts of the town. I have frequently, when seated in a veranda, watched two or three at a time on the grass plot close to the bungalow. They are pretty and interesting objects when thus observed, running in short starts here and there, flitting up their tails something like a water hen, bobbing their heads up and down, and picking and boring with their long bills under the fallen leaves. If anyone approached they would suddenly squat, lying flat, with their bills along the ground, and their large bright eyes fixed on the intruder, whom they often permitted to pass by within a yard or two. The bird has a mild, pleasant countenance, which also recommends it to favour; and I must add, for the honour of all of us concerned, that none of them were shot, or in any way molested, when thus treating themselves close to our dwellings.

Except when breeding, the snipe is a perfectly silent bird, although when flushed it will give out a short note, something between a feeble squeak and a snoring or hissing sound. It used sometimes to give me the idea of the bird suddenly withdrawing its bill or a leg out of the mud before taking wing. It has been likened to the syllable "skop" or "chuk" or "kik," and the Koles of Singbroom, a sharp-raced, call the bird "két batta," from this peculiar note. When breeding, its extraordinary notes in the air, accompanied by strange bleating and humming notes, are well known to those who have in summer traversed the moors and bogs of Ireland, Sweden, Norway, or wherever it nidificates. For an account of its nest and eggs the reader is referred to our works on British or European birds.

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DURING THE LONG PERIOD that has elapsed from the palmy days of the ancient Roman Empire until the present century, there have not been seen in Europe many of the larger African quadrupeds with which the emperors used to adorn their triumphs or exhibit to the populace in the amphitheatre, where they were, in common with the nobler animal, man, butcher'd to make a Roman holiday.

Laterly, however, the enterprise of zoological collectors has made us acquainted with many of these animals in a living state. The giraffe and the eland now breed freely in our vivaria, our children ride on African elephants, the hippopotamus brings forth its young in our waters, and at length the African rhinoceros is to be seen feeding quietly in the gardens of the Regent's Park.

Our Zoological Society now boasts of the finest collection of great pachyderms in the world, a collection which includes a pair of Indian elephants, a pair of African elephants, a pair of hippopotami, a pair of Indian rhinoceroses, and last, but not least in interest, the African rhinoceros, whose safe arrival was announced in THE FIELD of last week.

This animal, very distinct from its Asiatic congener; it differs strikingly in the number of horns, as well as in the character of its skin, which is destitute of those large folds, which cause the Indian species to remind the observer of a gigantic "hog in armour."

The arrival of this animal will not only give us the opportunity of observing closely its structure and habits, but will tend to clear up the confusion that prevails respecting the number of distinct species of African rhinoceros. Some writers—as Sir W. C. Harris admit the existence of two species only, the dark and the light, or as they are termed, the "white" and the "black." Others, as Dr A. Smith, describe three; some, as the late Mr Anderson, write of four; and Mr Chapman even speaks of a fifth species or hybrid.

Three of these species are very distinctly defined—the ordinary dark animal, the Rhinoceros bicornis (a very bad name, by the way, as grown reach a height of 6ft., and a length of 13ft., the tail not included. Its present height is 3ft., and length about 6ft. In general appearance the mature animal resembles a gigantic pig, the limbs being brought under the body. The feet are most

singular in form, being very distinctly three-toed, and the remarkable trefoil-like spoor that they make in the soil render the animal easy to track. The horns vary greatly in length in different animals, the first not unfrequently reaches a length of 2ft., the second being considerably shorter. These appendages differ very much from ordinary horns; they are, in fact, more of the nature of agglutinated hair, being attached to the skin only, and consequently they separate from the skull when the latter is preserved.

The least is not remarkable for comeliness, especially in the mature animal, in which the skin of the face is deeply wrinkled, and the small eyes are surrounded with many folds. The upper lip, as is well shown in the engraving, is elongated, and is used in gathering the food.

The specimen in the gardens is at present remarkably tame and docile. Whether he will continue so as he arrives at maturity is not by any means a certainty; but the new building now being erected for the greater quadrupeds will afford ample space for his safe exhibition, whatever his disposition may ultimately become.

The adult animals are described by Sir W. C. Harris in his "Illustrations of the Game Animals of South Africa," in a manner which is the reverse of flattering. He styles them "swinish, cross-grained, ill-tempered, wallowing brutes." From their dulness of observation they will often permit the near approach of man, and when roused turn round in a hoglish and spiteful manner, and charge with reckless impetuosity; rushing in their blind fury straight ahead, so that their charge may be evaded by leaping on one side, and then, if the hunter has not lost his presence of mind, he will put in his bullet behind the shoulder; but the thickness of the skin is so great that lead alone fattens out, and the bullet must be alloyed with tin to render it sufficiently hard to penetrate to the heart or lungs.

It may be hoped that early education and a good moral training may develop a better disposition in the specimen now in the gardens; but judging from the temper of the two Asiatic specimens there is not much hope of his remaining as docile as he is at present.

W. B. THOMPTON.

THE ZOOLOGICAL ASPECT OF THE GAME LAWS.

SIR,—The zoological aspect of the Game Laws has been again brought before the British Association; and last week the Saturday Review contained an article which commented upon that portion of Mr Newton's paper which related to the subject of game and its enemies.

There is surely no more interesting paper than the Saturday Review. For myself, I have taken it in almost from its first appearance; and have been delighted with the force and accuracy of the English, on which I rather obtrusively prides itself; with the learning, especially the most interesting, of one of its writers; and with many thoughts of humor frequently to be found in its pages. But, if I have ever gone to it for pure amusement, I have seized upon its sporting articles, or its reviews of works on natural history; because columns full of blunders—most engaging perhaps when they are blunders into accuracy, proceeding from absurd premises, and propounded with all the pomp of infallibility—are productive of that merit which the faculty recommends after dinner, and as a companion to Laflie.

I have little to do now with the question whether Mr Newton is right or wrong when he attributes the grouse disease to the excessive slaughter of birds and beasts of prey; that question I discussed long before Mr Newton took it up, and THE FIELD, I should think, has had enough of it. I only desire to point out that the article in the Saturday Review of September 12th is neither written by a naturalist nor a sportsman.

The writer scoffs at the notion that the peregrine makes the ordinary his larder, and dines off dying patients. "Did anyone ever say he did? Infirm and dying grouse do not rise with the cover, they remain on the ground unseen by the falcon; there they die a natural death, or are put out of their misery by some passing stoat. They cannot propagate disease; they can only rot under its influence. But the grouse that can get up, that can take a mate, that can begot or hatch a tainted progeny, that that falls to the stoat, that a little behind the rest, and is therefore reached first. For the wild peregrine seldom comes upon game from the air, unless from a very considerable distance; if they rise when he is floating above them, they have been put up by accident; he comes generally from the high rocks, and makes almost a stern chase of it. In the few instances in which he stoops from immediately above, I grant he may take a forward bird; but certainly not when he lies in his ordinary manner."

But to the reviewer all this is as nothing. The peregrine, he declares, takes its prey from the ground as a rule; to kill it on the wing is an exceptional matter altogether. This is the genuine man's nature inquiry. Let us wish him joy of it. It certainly has the advantage of consistency, for it does not break the beautiful oneness of the Saturday