SPORT IN NORTH BORNEO.

A MORE DETAILED ACCOUNT of sport in North Borneo and of the country generally than is given in my letter of Feb. 1st last may not be uninteresting to your readers.

British North Borneo is about the same size as Ireland. On the west coast and for some distance inland there is a fair scattering of people; but the east coast and interior is simply one vast primeval forest.

The people—Sundyaks or Mongol Dyaks, as they are called by Horniman—are for the most part extremely lazy; not, I think, because laziness is really one of their natural characteristics, but because of the four following causes: (1) The extreme fertility of the land, owing to which one or two acres, if put under the roughest cultivation, yield enough to keep in food a whole household, frequently composed of two or three families; (2) the abundance of natural produce—rattans, camphor, beeswax, india-rubber, and the like—which enables anyone by a week or two's collecting to live in ease for a month or two afterwards; (3) the absence of any needs, desires, or tastes by the natives, except for the barest necessities; and (4) the repeated exactions, up to about twelve years ago, of marauders and oppressors of all kinds, who attacked any individual or community that showed any symptoms of keeping anything of permanent value, and appropriated it. When forest produce becomes scarcer and population larger, these people will have to work for their living; and when that time arrives I have no doubt they will work well enough, as they have plenty of sturdy Chinese blood in their veins. In no case need it be feared that they will disappear before advancing civilisation; on the contrary, with a proper government and good order guaranteed, they will increase and multiply rapidly.

The enormous forest will, no doubt, in time fall before the axe of the agriculturist, as nearly every acre of it is adapted for cultivation, and very little space, comparatively, is taken up by rocky hills and mountains, or other useless land. The ground is nearly everywhere covered with a good mould soil; numerous rivers offer cheap means of communication and transport over most of it; the climate is healthy, in the interior particularly, where also the nights are even cold; and, with everything in its favour, no doubt in time the country will be as thickly populated as the best parts of China or Java. At present, however, radiating lines can be drawn north, south, and west from the inner end of Sandakan Bay for sixty or seventy or more miles, without any of them passing through anything but virgin forest of fine timber trees, and without the slightest trace of human handiwork. The head of the bay, one of the finest harbours in the world, claiming an equality with Sydney and Rio Janeiro, is itself twenty miles from the sea.

This forest is very fairly inhabited by elephants, rhinoceroses, lissangs or bantengs, deer, pigs, bears, and other animals. The elephant is the most conspicuous of these.

The presence of elephants in the country has been chronicled since Pigafetta first visited Borneo, about the middle of the sixteenth century. Although roaming about in the forest usually by twos and threes, they are sometimes met with in herds of forty or fifty. About one in four or five are tuskers. They are most common in the district from the back of the Labuk to the Quarmoti; in the Tanjong Unsang promontory also they are fairly common. A native named Torrid shot four out of a herd at Terrahun (near Dewhurst Bay), with a Snider rifle I lent him, and brought me the heads, one of which is, I think, in the museum at Oxford, and another at Batavia. Only two elephants have been bagged by Europeans, one by Mr Allard, and one by the same gentleman with the assistance of a Mr Sefton; both at the Segama. On the Lower Segama elephants are fairly plentiful; Mr Allen told me he counted over fifty there on one occasion. In hilly districts they are usually found only singly, and cease altogether in the more thickly populated parts, which, indeed, are not good for game of any kind, as the Sundyaks are great pot-hunters, constantly beating up the forest with packs of dogs, which bag anything, from rhinoceroses downwards; even monkeys are scarce in their districts.

It is difficult to land anywhere on the banks of a river at any place within fifty miles of Sandakan without seeing traces of more or less elephants; but seeing their tracks by no means implies that you are going to see the animals themselves. Owing to the density of the forest, the utter want of open ground, and the difficulty of getting about at all quickly, they are very rarely viewed. The same difficulty, it must be understood, is found when hunting any animals here. There are no special places that any animals frequent, there are no open spaces, there is no possibility of conducting a drive to any particular place, and no people to conduct the drive with if there were. To follow the spoor of any beast is simply to go on mile after mile into the heavy forest, and if you do get near your quarry, it always knows before you do, and a heavy plunging and crashing through the forest in your front is the only result, as far as you are concerned, of a day's tracking. And then you have to find your way back to your camp through primeval forest, every acre of which looks exactly the same as all the other millions of acres of it, it being quite impossible to see more than thirty or, at the outside, forty yards in any direction through any part of it.

On one occasion I had a very good opportunity of judging how many elephants there are in the forest. I was crossing from the Segaluid to the Kina Batangan rivers, and had with me a Malay boy, three Sooloo carriers, and my faithful orderly Awong Damit, who was struck down at my side with amnesty, and died a few months afterwards, when taking soundings at a new port on the south-eastern part of the territory. We were hurrying through the forest as fast as we could, when suddenly there was one of those great gusts of wind that are forerunners of a heavy downfall in this part of the world; the sun was shining brightly, and as the sky cannot be seen from below the forest cover, I had no idea that a squall was working up, or I would have camped in earlier. In a minute the sun was obscured; a great rushing sound, harder than the roaring of the wind in the tree-tops, was heard; and in two minutes more a deluge of rain that can only be compared to a shower bath was falling. I collected my men as hastily as I could on the top of a small hillock, which did not seem to be overhung, as far as I could judge, by any particularly old or rotten tree, and we proceeded to cover ourselves in as rapidly as we could. A skeleton roof was run up, of nine upright saplings, with altogether seven cross sticks at the top, and a large canvas, well boiled in linseed oil, which I always take with me when forest travelling, thrown over the top; this afforded a waterproof shelter, and was finished in ten minutes. We, of course, were as wet as though we had fallen into a river; but a fire was made under the shelter, and, after a mouthful of whisky all round, we were soon brewing a cup of hot tea. As a rule, in the forest I make my men sleep on a raised platform of sticks, but to-night we all slept on round poles simply laid on the ground. There had not been any rain for nearly a month before, and, as usual when a big rain comes after a drought, lots of old trees fell down, the consequence being that every hour or so throughout the night, a tearing, rending sound would be heard, as the roots gave way in the ground, then a heavy swishing noise as the branches fell through the leaves of the surrounding trees, and finally a terrific crash, making the earth shake nearly a quarter of a mile away. This was nearly always followed by the loud trumpeting of elephants as they rushed away through the forest. Two or three times we heard them go by quite close to us, and the Malay lad kept a fire burning all night to prevent our being run over by mistake by the big brutes in their fright.

Next day, about three in the afternoon, I came out all right at Sebongan on the Kina Batangan. There are no people at this place, but my boats, which I had sent round from Sandakan to meet me there, were waiting for me.

The rhinoceros (R. Sumatranus), though not so common as the elephant, is more often seen, as it does not take alarm so easily. Both elephants and rhinoceroses are not very uncommon, even so short a distance off as ten miles at the back of the town. Rhinoceroses sometimes stray in a good deal closer; three years ago one walked across my tennis lawn, and quite recently one was amongst some fruit trees on my cattle run. The Bornean rhinoceros is not nearly so large an animal as the Indian one, nor have I ever heard of its charging any one. I met one face to face the other day in the forest, but, although he looked at me for nearly a minute, he did nothing, and after a short time went on his way. I was within fifteen yards of him, and edged up to a small tree, that I could have dived up in a hurry if he developed any hostile intentions. I had only a butterfly net with me at the time. I find I generally see most butterflies when I am carrying a rifle, and most big game when I have a butterfly net.

Rhinoceroses are more frequently shot by the natives than elephants, but the only one that has ever been bagged by a European was killed by Mr Dohee, a Ceylon planter, who was here some years ago.

A small number of Bubalus buffelus, the common water buffalo, occur wild in the Bengkoka district in Malludu Bay. They are descendants of escaped tame ones no doubt, but are wild enough now, and perhaps the most dangerous animals to hunt we have in the country, as they charge freely if wounded, and have treed sportsmen on more than one occasion.

Bibos banteng, the lissang, occurs generally throughout the country; it is a large animal, very like an ordinary bull, although one of its nearest relations, the ghaur, is called the Indian bison. It frequents old and deserted clearings and the banks of rivers, or any place where it can find grass. The Bengkoka river, that I have just referred to, is a very good district for this animal also, as well as for deer. At the mouth of the Kina Baetangan large herds of the banteng may sometimes be seen. Mr Cavie, I think, claims to have shot the first ever killed by a European; plenty more have been killed since by other people.

The deer we have (Rusa equina) is a variety of the well-known sambhur; it grows to the size of a good large pony, and I have seen some even bigger; but, however large it may be, its horns never have more than three tines. It also is common wherever there is any grass, and bags of two or three are sometimes made. On one occasion, with Mr Cavie, we got seven in a morning's hunting. I scored a right and left, but most of them were secured by the aid of a pack of dogs.

Pigs are the animals that afford most sport. The best way of hunting them is on foot, with dogs and spears or knives. The dogs are sharp-nosed, prick-eared little native animals, who know exactly what to do and what not to do. If the pig is not too large, several of them seize its head and hold it down until you come up; but if the pig fights they run after it, biting its legs until it wheels round and goes for them, when they open out and scatter directly, but two or three of them are always behind it, snapping at its quarters until piggy comes to bay, with its back to a bank or tree trunk. When the hunters come up the fun gets fast and furious, and you have to look out for yourself if it is a tusker; but even in the case of the largest and fiercest boar, three-quarters of the vehemence is taken out of its charge owing to the fact that two or three little dogs instantly bite at its flank. Still, if the pig is at all a big one, one has to be very nimble on one's feet and adroit with the spear to prevent accident, and it is not advisable to go too close unless there are three or four of you. The natives are so used to it, however, and work so well together, that they have no hesitation in attacking rhinoceroses if the dogs can bring them to bay. On two occasions I have known rhinoceroses to be thus bagged. The little dogs' teeth are very sharp, and after a long chase I have seen the unfortunate pig's flank torn to ribbons. Attempts to import dogs with a strain of bull in them, that will run right in and hold the pig at once, always end in grief. For the first hunt or two things usually work very well; pigs are seized, held, and knifed, and large bags made; but the experiment usually finishes with the tackling of the first tusker. Of course, at one time or another the little native dogs get a boar's tusk or a sow's teeth into them, and the hero of a hundred fights is usually scored all over. Most of the wounds, being inflicted as the dog is running away, are not very severe; but European dogs get forthwith gored to death then and there.

I may take this opportunity of mentioning that European sporting dogs rarely survive long. The climate seems to suit them well enough, but, if they are not killed by pigs, they usually get eaten by crocodiles. Native dogs know very well that it is dangerous to go in the water, and will not cross a stream, however small, except under great excitement, as, for instance, when they have got a deer or pig actually in view before them; but imported dogs are always jumping into the water and swimming about, with the inevitable result that some time or other, even before their master's eyes, they suddenly sink in the water and disappear, without a bark, seized by an invisible crocodile. On four successive hunts within a month we lost a dog each time—two killed by pigs, one eaten by a crocodile, and one, a rough-coated retriever, was wrapped round by long thorn-covered rattan sprays, and perished miserably.

Pigs are one of the (very few) curses of Borneo; in Sarawak large sago districts are sometimes devastated by them, while at Sandakan, even close at the back of the town, I have seen garden after garden of Chinese vegetable planters cleared out by them. I myself had a plantation of 25,000 pineapples and 2000 bananas eaten to the last one by them. We were catching and killing from sixty to eighty pigs a week at that time, all by the aid of dogs. Of course, the greater part of these animals were small ones, weighing from 40lb. to 60lb. each, but tuskers were not uncommon.

Some of the pigs are enormous, weighing up to 400lb. and more.

Our bear is not a large one—it weighs about 120lb. or 140lb.; it is a sufficiently nasty brute to tackle, however. It seems evenly distributed throughout the country, but is everywhere scarce. Mr Mitchelson was the first Englishman I ever heard of that shot one; more have been shot since by Mr Allard and others. Mr Mitchelson got his in the forest, about six miles back of the town.

The clouded tiger (Felis macrocelis or nebulosa), the largest of our Felidæ, is very scarce. Very little is known about its habits, but it is not supposed to feed on anything larger than a monkey, or perhaps a goat. The true tiger, as well as the leopard, are both unknown in Borneo.

The orang-utan is not to be regarded properly as a game animal, and knocking one of them out of a tree is little less than manslaughter; still, they are not exactly to be regarded as pets, and I had to shoot three which were taking up their abode at the back of my garden. The male measured 4ft. 6in. The orang-utan of this part of Borneo is undoubtedly larger than that of Sarawak, where the largest that Wallace got was 4ft. 2in. only, while the smallest full-grown male that I have measured here was 4ft. 4in. One that Mr Dunlop shot (duly chronicled in your pages at the time) was as much as 4ft. 10in.

The tapir is said to be indigenous to Borneo, but I have never seen or heard of the slightest indication of its occurrence in this part of Borneo.

The kejang, or roe deer, is more often found near the outskirts of cultivated ground than in the primeval forest. It is a pretty graceful animal, and very good eating (as indeed is the larger deer also, whereas I have been told by Ceylon men that the sambhur there is not thought much of). Its harsh bark can easily be mistaken for that of the bear. It can be certainly attracted by cultivating a small patch of sweet potatoes near the edge of the forest.

The little mouse deer, scarcely larger than a hare, completes our list of game animals. Besides these, there are monkeys, squirrels, insectivorous animals, and lots of others. Of the smaller carnivora alone we have quite a number—Felis marmorata, the marbled cat, and two, if not three, other proper wild cats, besides civets, musangs, otters, the binturong, the mydans, and several other more or less cat, weasel, or badger-like animals.

It must not be supposed that any of these animals, with the exception of monkeys and squirrels, are often seen—quite the contrary. One may go through the forest for days, and see nothing at all except a few apes or monkeys; but at one time or another other animals are trapped, shot, or in some other way obtained—rarely two alike; and even now, after an eleven years' residence in Borneo, I not unfrequently have animals that I have never seen before brought to me.

Of game birds there are very few worthy of the name. Two or three large pigeons are very abundant in some few places, but with these and a very few snipe and quail our list is exhausted. Argus pheasants, fireback pheasants, and two species of partridges are common, and even plentiful, in the forest, but, though often enough heard, are rarely seen, and never give anything but a running shot, as they cannot fly in the thick forest.

Although not often seen, crocodiles are only too common, and are very dangerous. The size they grow to is sometimes immense. I always fire at them whenever I get the slightest chance, and it is also great fun fishing for them with a dead animal, bound on to a short stick in the manner that has been so often described. A 16-foot crocodile on the end of a 40-yard rattan is something like a fish to land.

Snakes may be described as even rare; their scarcity is, I think, attributable to the number of wild pigs, which eat them. Pythons from 16ft. to 22ft. long are sometimes come across. They are not dangerous to man, but have a most inordinate appetite for fowls. I once saw seven fowls, and on another occasion five, taken out of the bodies of two that had been killed in the fowl-house.

The quantities of fish on our coast are not to be surpassed anywhere. They are of all sorts, colours, and sizes, and an unusual proportion of them are very good eating. Very little attention is given to fishing by our European community, who are too hard-worked all the week round to devote much time to anything else. "No Sunday work" is part of the Labour League." The very little leisure that anyone gets accounts in a large measure for so little being known about our large game shooting also. When going along the coast in a steam launch, I generally trail a fishing-line astern, baited with a piece of cloth, a bell being tied to a hitch in the line inboard to give notice when a fish is caught. By these means from one to three fine fish are usually caught every day, generally averaging from 15lb. to 40lb.

A short time since it was my business to travel from near our south-east boundary to Sandakan, a distance of over 200 miles, in a canoe. On this journey I had several opportunities of watching the habits and mode of life of the Bajans or sea gipsies. It was very curious, amongst other things, to see them spearing fish. The canoe, with two men in it, is propelled quietly over the shallows by the man at the stern, care being taken that it shall glide along evenly, and without any jerky motion; the other man stands up in front with a long light sharpened bamboo called a "tumbeloosow" in his hand, which he throws with the most extraordinary aim at any fish that rushes across the boat's bars, transfixing it more often than not. This feat is the more wonderful considering that not only has the speed the fish darts along at to be taken into account, but also the deflection caused by the water to be allowed for. It is curious to see them also stealing up to a shark, or large skate or ray basking on the surface. In this case a lance, with a loose iron hook, is used; this is launched, and the fish struck, and, the fish not being visible to the observer a short distance off, all that is seen is that the spear, lying down slightly backwards makes off through the water without any motive power being visible, cutting a line of bubbles as it goes. The canoe paddles hard in pursuit; presently the handle of the spear comes loose from the socket, but, being tied to the head, it helps considerably to stop the speed of the fish; and in a short time, the canoe coming up, the spear is seized, and the fish, after a lot of flopping and struggling, is killed (or nearly so) in the water and hauled on board.

All fry is fish that comes to these people, and it is a new experience to lie down in one of their boats and be gently propelled over a coral reef, with its masses of colour below in lumps not unlike huge painted mushrooms, haunted by fish of all sorts of gaudy colours, but principally of a strong deep blue, not in the slightest resembling the evanescent blue of the bleak of an English river. I never saw that resemblance to a flower garden to which some writers are so fond of comparing a coral reef. Meantime nothing escapes the practised eye of the Bajan in the bow; he thrusts down a pole at a wavy streak of bright cobalt blue, which immediately closes upon it, and, after some struggling to detach it from the coral, brings up a huge shellfish, something like an enormous cockle, 18in. broad. Opening this with a mallet and a wedge, he tears out the interior, which goes into the bottom of the boat, while the shells are thrown overboard, to suffer some further "sea change." Or on a patch of sand a queer-looking object is seen, which being thrust through with a spear promptly emits a black, inky cloud, jerking violently backwards at the same time—a cuttle fish. At other times big mussels are gathered, while frequently loathsome-looking sea slugs (Holothuria) are brought up from the bottom, to be dried for sale to Chinese traders. At the time a keen observation is kept out shorewards, where big fish sometimes go to find their food, and when seen the inevitable "tumbeloosow" is launched at them as they dart back towards deep water. Wherever a Bajan takes his family (they all live together, with their goods and chattels, cooking pots, and all other household goods, in a canoe not over 25ft. long), they always have plenty to eat—of a sort.

It was the dexterity with which they throw the tumbeloosow to a distance of forty yards or so that gave the Balignini, so dreaded but a few years ago, their superiority over the other natives of these parts, from Manila to Batavia. The Balignini are a sub-tribe of the Bajans.

On my way round the coast on that occasion on six different nights I had the mat covering torn clean off the canoe, and was deluged with rain each time before we could rig it up again; twice we were in danger of being blown out to sea, and only saved ourselves by tying up to coral rocks some 10ft. below the surface; and once we were caught in a squall when well at sea, and for an hour could not see the shore owing to the rain, and did not know where to steer, the waves getting bigger and bigger all the time. When the weather did clear we found ourselves almost back where we started from in the morning, and thought ourselves lucky we had not been driving out to sea all the time. It will be seen that the life of an official in the North Borneo Government service is not unattended with hardships.

The country generally is progressing well, especially Sandakan, as a good many companies have been started, mostly for planting tobacco in the neighbouring rivers, which will draw their supplies through that town. Laban, however, is wretchedly dear, and everything is very scarce. There is one large hotel in the place, rather an imposing-looking building; but it is kept by a Chinaman, and is extremely dirty, while the attendance is bad. Prices are low. Another hotel company has just been floated locally; another saw mill is in course of erection; and, although too much depends at present upon the success of tobacco cultivation, various other projects are in prospect, including gold-winning, cattle-breeding, coffee, pepper, indiarubber, and rattan growing—all of which promise well, the latter two in particular offering attractions to the sportsman or naturalist, as they present an opening for getting comparatively large returns from the investment of a very small capital, while there is a minimum of work to do, and that almost entirely in the forest itself.

MYNAH.