

WILD LIFE OF THE CENTRAL REGIONS

D. W. K. Macpherson

THE Bua/Rusa watershed of the Central Regions of Malawi used to be magnificent country for game animals, and there were large dry weather concentrations on the broader dambos. The antelope included most "possibles" for the country—Eland, Kudu, Sable, Roan, Haartebeeste (Lichtenstein's), Waterbuck, Reedbuck, Oribi, Puku. The area was an obvious choice for hunting parties from all over Nyasaland.

Namitete trading centre, thirty miles from Lilongwe on the road to Mchinji, and what is now known as the Namitete river, a tributary of the Bua, take their name from the original Mtete river, the river of thorn trees (*Acacia campylacantha*). When I came here in 1929 the twenty miles from here to the Bua with the surrounding bushland and tributary dambos were full of game of all sorts, particularly a herd of Eland that must have been two or three hundred strong. It was harried by all concerned of course, most successfully perhaps by the brothers C . . . who went in for biltong and reims, but at week-ends most planters from here to the Bua and Lilongwe would be out for a buck.

Rarest of the larger antelope were Sable, but they can occur anywhere, in small herds, more particularly in the heavier bushed *Combretum/Acacia* country, whereas the Roan were more localised, in lighter wooded *Brachystegia*, and the herds were generally larger than Sable. A herd of thirty or forty Roan was not unusual, but half that number large for Sable. There were more Roan in the Dwangwa/Kasungu area than Namitete/Bua, and more again on the upper Bua reaches near the border post Fort Manning—(now Mchinji); in particular near the six mile stretch of anti-tsetse clearing that Rodney Wood, the country's first Game Warden, made along the Fort Manning road from the Bua bridge. Tsetse fly were encroaching from the North, and this was an attempt to stop them getting into the more heavily populated cattle areas to the South. The belt of clearing was half a mile wide, and the whole idea not unsuccessful, for although fly were to be found to the south for a time, they soon disappeared. The clearing proved useful too, as orders were given by the local authority P. H. Zulu, that Mango trees should be planted, and this was the first effort in what is now the common practice all over the district of mangos "orchard" fashion throughout the maize gardens.

Kudu, Eland and Haartebeeste could be found in any type of bushland, Reedbuck and Oribi on any dambo, the Oribi more on the broad stretches of the Bua and Rusa dambos, mostly in pairs; but there was generally a small herd of Reedbuck, up to eight or ten in number, in any little feeder. Waterbuck of course anywhere near water, and Puku in herds of up to thirty or forty confined to the Bua and Rusa, always on the dambo, to seek shade they go no further than the forest edge.

The road from the Mudi/Bua junction leading down the Bua to what came to be known as the Governor's Camp, put up by Rodney Wood for Sir Charles Bowring, was a real game park right through the thirties. In those seven or eight miles you could see any or all of the above during the dry season. The camp itself was just a collection of grass shacks perched on a high bank of the Bua, under the shade of three or four massive "Nkunku" trees (*Acacia galpinii*). It was a pleasant spot overlooking a long stretch of the river and dambo: there was always game in sight, and the trees were the particular haunt of the dainty little Blue Flycatcher (*Erannornis albicauda*), a rather rare and localised species whose restless movements with flirting wings and tail are always a delight to watch. But bird-life was profuse, and one could hope to identify a hundred species before starting on the passerines. Some of the locally rarer aquatic birds that one has recorded from time to time have been Osprey, Red-bellied Heron, little Bittern, both the resident and the migratory forms, Terek and Curlew Sandpipers, Avocet and Stilts. The mud-flats of the Bua and indeed of any little farm dam are still full of interest for the bird-watcher, particularly in October and November when so many of the palaeartic migrants are passing through.

There were plenty of Hippo in the larger pools and papyrus swamps of the Bua. Crocodiles—quite a few but nothing like at lake level or below as the altitude would be still about 3,000 feet.

No Rhino except for an odd stray (we even had one in a burial thicket on the Namitete river a few years ago); but there were a few in the bush round Ngara—the old Boma. Here too was a large herd of Buffalo whose stronghold was the thick bush along the Kasangadzi river. There were not so many buffalo further up the Bua until nearer the Mchinji range of hills where bamboo thickets near Chirwa hill were a haunt.