

# In Search of The Red Ape

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### *In Search of the Red Ape*

gulping noise and shaking branches, threatening. William also took up the call but preceded his gulps with a curious sucking squeak. He moved across into another tree, bending branches perilously to bridge the gap, then disappeared into a thick tangle of climbing bamboos. Loud crunching noises suggested that he had not abandoned his meal. Mary continued to feed, still avoiding my gaze, but after another ten minutes she made a dignified retreat, moving slowly and carefully to the bamboos, her baby, David, still clinging tightly to her side.

I tried to go round the bamboos from the other side, but by the time I had forced a way through the thicket there was no sound or movement from the orangs. I waited, quietly scanning the surrounding forest, then saw Mary high up in a tree some fifty yards away. David was playing alone, dangling at the end of a springy branch by one arm, while his mother kept a watchful eye on him. He gazed blankly in my direction as he swung, then suddenly he saw me, ducked his head and, giving shrill whimpers, hurried back to his mother. Mary gathered him protectively in her arms and, with David clinging tightly to her side, she climbed along the branch, which bent under her weight, and swung across into the trees beyond. It was getting late, and since the orangs would nest nearby I made no further attempt to follow them. I headed home, cutting saplings to mark my route for the morrow.

As darkness fell the forest was filled with the eerie echoing call of the *Tanggil*. I crashed blindly on through the undergrowth, regardless of thorny creepers or anything but the glowing face of my luminous compass. The moon shone brightly, leaving scattered patches of light on the forest floor. I kept travelling south-east and an hour later was back at camp taking my evening bath. There was still no sign of my men, so I cooked my rice, opened a welcome tin of meat and made ready for bed. Now that I had time to review my encounter with the orangs I was much too excited

### *A Hostile World*

to sleep. I tossed to and fro on my hard bark couch and regretted not having a net to keep out the plague of sandflies and mosquitoes.

Long before daylight I was up packing tins and a plastic cape into my bag prior to hurrying back into the forest. I followed the elephant path to the little river, then headed north-west again by compass. By nine o'clock I knew I had missed the horseshoe ridge and must be far beyond the area of the previous day. I headed downhill back towards the little river but when I reached it found no more than a stream. Certainly I had come too far. I splashed along the stream bed, following each twist and turn. Then I noticed footprints in the sand - footprints of a large animal with three toes. Only one animal could have been responsible - *Badak*, the two-horned rhinoceros. The tracks led downstream and looked very fresh. At any other time I would have followed them in the hope of seeing this rare, almost legendary, animal but just then I was desperately trying to get the study off to a good start, and it was orangs I had come to see, not rhinos. I was not to know that it would be over a year before I saw rhino tracks again.

Leaving the stream, I climbed a small hill and followed an animal path on to another ridge. I noticed a movement to my left and dived for cover. A tiny brown *mawas* climbed quickly down from the top of an enormous tree and swung gaily through the branches towards me. As it drew near I saw it was larger than I had first thought, probably about three years old. He was a delicious, dark chocolate colour, with pink rings round his button eyes and a shiny bald head. I named him Midge. He climbed up on to a branch only twenty yards away but did not see me squatting behind a ground palm. There was a heavy, crashing sound and a small tree swung in a wide arc towards him then quickly away again as a large orang-utan transferred herself to Midge's tree, then climbed up to join him. For a moment I wondered if these could be the same animals I had seen the

by game laws. It is the size of a buffalo and the bull looks very striking with his black coat and white rump and socks. The cows are smaller and warm chestnut in colour. The tracks of these animals are very similar to those of domestic cattle but uncommon so far into the jungle. I saw the animals only three times and always they were inquisitive, standing watching me as I approached, then cantering ahead to stop and stare again. One day we found flattened grass beside the river, and human footprints and patches of blood informed us that poachers had been at work. Hidden in the ferns were the discarded head and guts of a large bull *Banteng*. Bahat explained that the meat would fetch a high price in the town as beef.

One of the rarest animals of the forest was the two-horned rhino, much prized for its fabled horns which are supposed to have great healing properties and act as a powerful aphrodisiac. At the turn of the century the rhino was not uncommon in the Segama area and they were often hunted by Dusuns with blowpipes and spears but the advent of the shotgun seems to have been the animal's downfall. They have become so scarce that few Dusuns to-day have ever seen the tracks, let alone a rhino in the flesh. Ibans from Sarawak still make a living from poaching the last few remaining rhinos and would spend weeks at a time tracking the beasts. Although I had seen fresh rhino tracks on my third day in the jungle I found them again only a dozen times in sixteen full months in the Ulu Segama. They were usually around the mud wallows in the hills at the north end of my research area. I never had a clear view of a rhino, though once disturbed a large animal who crashed away down the slope, and, despite all my subsequent efforts, this was as close as I got to the rare creature. On another occasion I followed two sets of fresh tracks for over an hour in the hope of seeing the beasts. A strong animal smell still lingered so I knew they could not be far ahead. I could see where they had trampled down small bushes to feed on the

leaves and the tree-trunks were muddy from their passing. Unfortunately the tracks came out on to hard gravel and although I cast far to each side I found no further trace and had to give up the trail.

The rhino may be rare but at least it is a well-known and scientifically documented animal, which is more than can be said of *Batütüt*. I was travelling alone along a hill ridge on the far side of the river where I had never ventured before. The path was good, though rather muddy, and I hadn't a care in the world. Suddenly I stopped dead, amazed at what I saw. I knelt down to examine the disturbing footprint in the earth, a print so like a man's yet so definitely not a man's that my skin crept and I felt a strong desire to head home. The print was roughly triangular in shape, about six inches long by four across. The toes looked quite human, as did the shapely heel, but the sole was both too short and too broad to be that of a man and the big toe was on the opposite side to what seemed to be the arch of the foot.

Farther ahead I saw more tracks and went to examine them. There were imprints of both left and right feet, though which was which I could not tell from their curious distribution. Many of the prints had been obliterated by recent pigs but a few were quite clear and I made drawings of some of these and notes of their relative positions. I found two dozen footprints in all, scattered along some fifty yards of path. Still uneasy about my find I continued along the ridge until I reached terrain I knew quite well.

Perhaps my mind was preoccupied with other things for I could find no sign of orang-utans. I was quite happy to abandon my quest and shelter under a leaning tree-trunk waiting out a sudden rainstorm. Thoughtfully I made my way back through the dripping forest to the river, where Bahat was waiting with the boat.

Back at camp I showed him my sketches and asked what animal could make such tracks. Without a moment's hesitation he replied '*Batütüt*' but when I asked him to

the serow twenty miles north to Ketambe and ferried it across the fast-flowing Alas River. The animal was in no hurry to leave its saviour but finally roamed off into the forest when the boat bobbed back across the rapids.

It was here at Ketambe that Herman was planning a rehabilitation centre for the release of captive and illegally owned Sumatran orangs. Under the direction of a local *pawang* a bungalow and animal shelters were already half built. In many ways the set-up was similar to that at the Sepilok in Borneo. Ketambe, however, had two great advantages. Since the site was across the river from the little-used road to Blangkedjeren it was remote from any human interference and, conversely, the orang-utans could not cause havoc in the *kampong* gardens. Moreover, the area abutted on to a vast tract of over a million acres of forest, inhabited by a healthy population of wild orangs. Herman already knew several of the residents and scattered 'villages' of nests attested to the presence of more. Game rangers had hacked a convenient system of tracks through the region and constructed a treetop hide overlooking a waterhole. The wet sand bore the imprints of deer and a small cat and only a week or so before Herman had found tracks of rhinoceros a little way downstream.

The forest here was much taller and wetter than round my camp on the Ranun River. Everywhere abounded the terrible *Latang*, whose stinging leaves cause weeping, red weals wherever they touch the skin. These wounds smart for days and are especially painful if they come into contact with water. Since there were no elephants to clear trails, travel through the thick undergrowth was difficult and there was certainly no shortage of leeches. I did not envy Herman his choice to work in such a place but the area was rich in fruits and vines and ideal for orang-utans.

Farther south at the village of Balelulu we visited three orangs waiting to be moved to their new home. The youngsters had destroyed the henhouse in which they slept

and were gradually expanding their range to terrorise the neighbouring banana, pawpaw and coffee plantations. In spite of their years in captivity they were capable nest-builders and sampled the wild trees as readily as the cultivated fruits. I could see no reason why they should not readily adapt to normal living in the reserve. The eldest of the trio was an adolescent female and the undisputed ruler. Her companions were only infants and clung together for mutual comfort at every opportunity.

The road back bumped and twisted along the valley. It was in an appalling condition and used by little traffic. After every flood all the bridges had to be re-erected. Even on the main Sumatran highways road repairs were a pretty slapdash affair. Gangs of coolies poured basketloads of rocks into the gaping potholes and the surface was levelled off with thick, red earth. At each approaching vehicle work stopped so that the bouncing transport could compact the stretches already completed. It was a great pity that after so much back-breaking toil the very next heavy rainstorm undid all their efforts. Only the most important trunk roads merited a cover of tarmac and so were spared some of the ravages of the elements.

We drove along the Alas valley enjoying the breathtaking view. Rising up to the misty mountains the forest was a beautiful blend of every shade and hue of green with here and there a brighter splash of orange or flame. Siamangs and leaf-monkeys, completely untroubled by our presence, performed by the wayside and a band of macaques gamboled along the beach beside the river. Night overtook us as we meandered through the *kampong* lands, where water buffalo wallowed in the ditches and chickens and ducks paddled among the *padi*.

Back at Kutatjane Herman told us the history of the orphans we had met. All three had belonged to a policeman in Lau Baleng. Until recently one of the greatest difficulties of conservation in Sumatra has been the impossibility of