

R. J. Prickett

The African Ark

with 7 colour plates and
35 other illustrations by Frank W. Lane



Bushbuck, drawn by John Prickett and reproduced
from *The Living Forest* by R. J. Prickett



David & Charles
Newton Abbot

1974

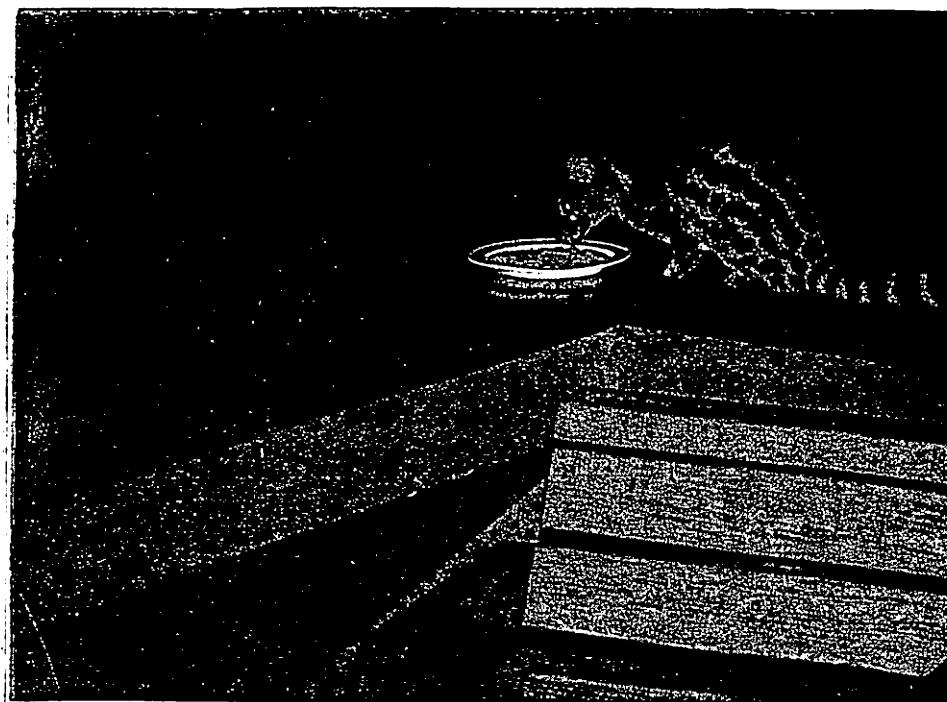
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formation which gives a lightweight strength ratio to carry the immense weight of the animal. Above the brain is an area of perforated bone which looks just like a lorry radiator, and which may be up to 18in deep. Doubtless this is a help in pushing over small trees when feeding. A bullet placed there does not appear to give the animal even a headache, and it takes a very experienced hunter to know just where this area ends and the brain begins.

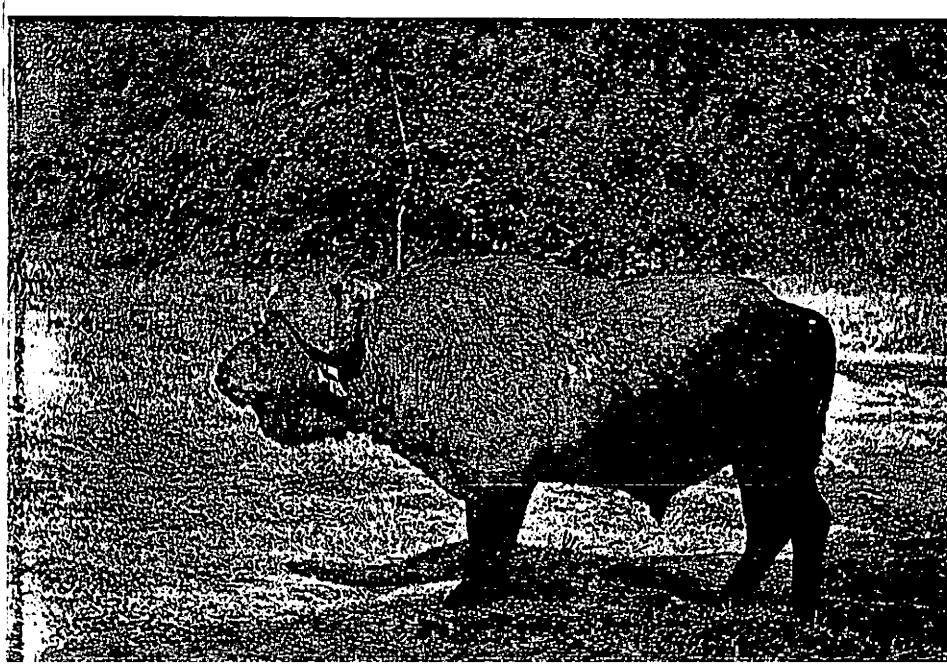
It is impossible to make an accurate census in the dense type of forest covering so much of the Aberdare Mountains, but it is thought by the Park Warden that about 3,000 elephants are now living there.

BLACK RHINOCEROS (*Diceros bicornis*) Of the two species of rhino, the Black and the White, only the black is native to Kenya. Half a dozen white have been brought up recently from South Africa and released in the Meru National Park, where they doubtless once abounded, but the success of the experiment has yet to be proved. Both names are ridiculous and have no bearing on colour, as the two animals are a uniform shade of grey, merging to brown. The black is also known as the 'Hook-lipped rhinoceros' which is much more descriptive and it is a great pity the name is not in more general use. The white rhino is supposed to have gained its name from the Afrikaans word 'Wyt' which means 'Wide' and doubtless referred to the great square mouth. Indeed, the white rhino has often been called the wide-mouthed rhino.

Of the two rhinos the black is by far the most common. It has been, and still is, ruthlessly killed for the sake of its horn which is then smuggled out of the country and sold to certain elderly gentlemen in the East who endow it with powers as an aphrodisiac. The fact that the horns can be cut into small pieces and hidden in, say, a bag of beans makes their smuggling out much



Page 53 Two of The Ark's regulars: (above) Large-spotted genet coming for its nightly feed; (below) Old Dewlap, the fearless buffalo bull. The large fold of skin hanging from the throat shows just why he was given the nickname





Page 56 (above) Common waterbuck; (below) Coke's hartebeest



BEASTS THAT WALK NEAR THE ARK

easier than ivory. For a long time it used to be believed that the horn is not true horn but compressed hairs. Latest scientific research, however, confirms that the horn is like a toe-nail. Where protection is effective the rhino, black or white, holds its own well and is in no immediate danger.

Ultimate danger to the rhino usually comes from the expanding human population and the habitat destruction which follows. Nearly a thousand of these great pachyderms had to be shot after the last war to accommodate the expanding Wakamba tribe.

The black rhino, the one found at The Ark, is much smaller than the white, and it is doubtful if the largest males ever weigh a full 2 tons. It is far less placid in temperament than the white and, over the years, has killed many people. Much of this alleged aggression, however, can be attributed to poor eyesight, an intense curiosity, and to the fact that in dense bush there is no room on the path for both his vast bulk and a fleeing man.

Black rhino are browsers but the white is a true grazer. This probably is the cause of the difference in the period of gestation, the black being sixteen months to the nine of the white. A strange difference between the black and the white rhino is that the calf of the white always precedes the dam, being guided by pressures of the long posterior horn, whereas the calf of the black trots obediently behind.

Both black and white are much infested with ticks and the tick bird, a species of starling, performs the dual role of relieving its host of these parasites and giving warning of impending danger. Both species also use a special midden to deposit their droppings and then scatter them with their hind feet. All rhinos carry a sore behind the shoulder, more pronounced in some than in others. This is purely superficial and confined to the epidermis. It is associated and involved with the life cycle of a species of fly. During part of this cycle the fly is in the scattered droppings of the rhino's own dung. The degree of inflammation depends on

the cycle stage of the fly and also the attentions of the ever-present tick birds.

In addition to the usual snortings and blowings the black rhino has a high-pitched squeak which sounds most incongruous for a beast of such size.

The population of black rhino on the whole of the Aberdare Mountain is thought to be now over 2,000.

AFRICAN BUFFALO (*Syncerus caffer*) Visitors to Kenya usually refer to the great black buffaloes they see as 'water' buffaloes. The domestic water buffalo in Africa is found only in Egypt and the Sudan but the wild buffalo, first discovered at the Cape by the Dutch, is found over most areas south of the Sahara. Its total population in Africa is believed to be between two and three million.

The buffalo is not indigenous to Africa as no bones have ever been found in prehistoric diggings. These animals are believed to have moved south into the continent from Asia millions of years ago. The little red 'bush cow' of West Africa is undoubtedly the most primitive form, and there is also a dwarf buffalo in the Sudan. As with so many animals, the buffalo reaches its greatest size in South Africa, but the record heads are to be found on Mount Kenya and the adjacent Aberdare Mountains.

Towards the close of the nineteenth century an outbreak of rinderpest broke out amongst all cloven-hoofed wild mammals near the point of contact with domestic stock in North Eastern Africa. It was most severe in the buffalo herds, sweeping through them all the way to the Cape. According to Rowland Ward, the epidemic was most severe in East Africa, where the survival rate was put at less than one in *ten thousand*. It speaks volumes for the vitality and reproductive powers of this animal that, after only a few decades, the herds were back to normal.

Buffalo are extremely fond of wallowing in mud and will trek

considerable distances both morning and night to suitable places. They are found in every type of habitat from the moorlands at 10,000ft altitude, to the steamy papyrus swamps at the coast; from dense tropical forest to the sandy wastes of the Kenya frontier, provided water is within reach.

Perhaps more people have been killed in Africa by the buffalo than any other animal and he has acquired a fearsome reputation. Yet the vast majority of buffalo are not ill-disposed to man and run away when disturbed. Even when wounded they do not always attack. Some old bulls living a solitary life do, however, become bad-tempered. Most buffalo when not severely hunted are extremely curious of behaviour they do not understand, and can be drawn quite close by waving a handkerchief on a stick. However, it is unwise to let them get too near.

The buffalo is such a dangerous adversary when wounded because his faculties of hearing, seeing and smelling are developed to a remarkable degree so that he is quite capable of circling and taking his enemy from behind. He is also one of the few animals habitually to look above his own height and to keep his head high when charging. His brain is protected by a boss that only the heaviest bullet can penetrate and his heart, frontally, is similarly protected by a massive dewlap. Once worked up into an absolute frenzy a buffalo is capable of absorbing bullet after bullet into the heart with no immediate effect. His hide is extremely thick and tough and he does not readily succumb to shock. A bull can reach a ton in weight, and with so many fighting qualities it is small wonder that hunters hold him in such high esteem.

One of my most vivid memories is of a buffalo hunt, with dogs, when doing control work in the mid-sixties. We found the spoor of a bull and his cow companion in the maize and followed into the depths of the forest. The procedure was for Mohamed, my trained companion at that time, to move slowly, eyes fixed

2 March 'At 11.45 pm tonight a fight was witnessed between two old buffalo bulls which lasted about fifteen minutes. It commenced with tail swishing and three complete circlings clockwise, after which they changed and went round twice anti-clockwise. Then they locked horns. As the bulls were in front of the dungeon the noise was terrific. When one started to gain the upper hand a younger animal moved in and butted the stern of the loser which then broke free and was chased away. After this the victor turned upon the assistant and chased him also.'

Mock fights of this type, without blood flowing, are common and are the means by which a herd leader maintains his leadership. The losers respect the strength displayed. Another male joining in to butt the loser has been noted before. This is also a feature of giant forest-hog behaviour although the hogs do not push but charge at each other like true gladiators. When the skulls meet the crack can often be heard inside the sound-proofed building, and the force often sends one hog down on its haunches. But the hogs are not serious. When he means business the forest-hog swings his head sideways. One swipe of his tusks can open up a dog from end to end.

20 March 'In the viewing lounge about thirty guests were sitting, drinking, talking, or just staring out into the glade. The time was 10 pm. By the floodlit water's edge six buffalo stood placidly grazing or wallowing. Suddenly four hyenas came loping out of the dense bush, passed in front of the now excited spectators and went on to the far side. As they neared cover a cow rhino stepped out and scattered them. She then continued on to chase the nearest buffalo for a hundred yards or so. In the light of subsequent events it would appear that this was her big mistake.

'At this stage a fifth hyena appeared following in the wake of

the others, but found it difficult to get past the buffalo and had to change direction several times. The cow rhino then returned to the bushes. The last hyena had gone, the six buffalo started to graze or wallow again and peace reigned in the glade. One or two guests retired for the night.'

'Suddenly the bush across the rush-fringed pool exploded with activity. At first it was thought that a wart-hog was running, surrounded by the pack of five hyenas, but as they neared, it was seen to be a baby rhino with a "pimple" horn just showing. Each time a hyena got in front the baby bowled it over, but twice others were seen to run in and bite at the rear. The milling group had just reached the muddy area on the right of the water when the first buffalo bull arrived, galloping fast. The spectators were now all standing ready to cheer. He waded straight in through the milling pack, lowered his head—and the baby was hurled for many yards, rolling over and over in the mud like a barrel. There he lay still.'

'The bull then began chasing hyenas in a lunging, pent-up fury. It is easy to bestow upon animals emotions which they do not possess. Probably the buffalo would have treated any species other than his own in the same way, regardless of age. A viewer on the open deck reported later that he heard the impact and a shrill squeal. Doubtless the mother heard this too. At all events she burst out of cover at that moment, moving very fast indeed for such a large and heavily built animal. For a few moments it appeared that even now the pack would finish the baby off for, as fast as the old bull chased hyenas away, others were sneaking back for a quick snatch at the prostrate body.'

'But the picture was now changing fast as other buffalo arrived upon the scene. The mother was standing over the body, pivoting continuously as she faced each hyena sneaking in. Even so she found it difficult and might have failed had not the buffalo kept up their chasing. At this point, three hyenas came very



Page 152 (above) The wart-like protuberances clearly show how this hog got its name; (below) relic of a pre-historic age, the black rhinoceros. Those seen at The Ark are often 'red' through wallowing in the reddish-brown earth



ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR OUTSIDE THE ARK—THIRD YEAR

'A youngster of about three years lay on his side outside the dungeon. A big cow came over and stood above him. Then she moved her legs in a bunched up fashion until she had him cradled. She lowered the stomach until she could finally rub it along his ribs. One could clearly hear the rasping noise made by the two hides. No human mother ever cradled her child and caressed it more effectively than did that cow elephant tonight.'

'Teddy Bear was in again tonight. He hunted first all around the building but caught nothing and was not seen again for some time. Then he was spotted sitting outside the bush opposite the verandah, interested in something far out in the marsh. The eyesight of leopards at night is very keen. It was some minutes before we noted what he was watching. Through glasses we could see it was a marsh mongoose moving towards him.

'Teddy waited until the mongoose was about 20yd away, then he set off in long bounds. At once the mongoose turned and ran off as fast as it could, squeaking loudly all the time. The leopard overtook it in about a hundred yard's chase. Reaching it he made no effort to pick it up but danced around. Then he stopped and watched it go. The marsh mongoose is a fairly large animal, about 6lb in weight. Obviously the leopard was either not hungry or he did not fancy mongoose for his supper.'

29 August 'It would be wishful thinking to believe that no poaching takes place within this Park. There is, however, no large-scale poaching. The activities of hit-and-run weekend farm labour we will never be able to stop. Last night a giant forest-hog came in with a spear sticking out of its ribs and died near the building. I was not on duty. It was reported that only two hyenas found it before dawn. Tonight five came in. Soon there