

Frederick Courtenay Selous

A FEW FIELD NOTES

By CHARLES R. PODMORE

IN a previous article (Vol. 9 No. 1) we dealt principally with Selous's adventurous career as an ivory hunter. In the present contribution an effort has been made to summarise, among other topics, his observations on the coloration of African game animals, of which he had, we may perhaps submit, a knowledge unsurpassed by anyone before or since his time.

Although Selous hunted in various parts of the world it was to Africa that he was always attracted. Since his initial visit in September, 1871, when at the age of 19 he landed in Algoa Bay, until he died fighting for the Allied cause in East Africa in 1917 when he was 66, he was rarely absent from some part of the continent for more than a few years. Throughout the greater part of this time he was amassing the material embodied in his three main works, *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa*, *Travel and Adventure in South-East Africa* and *African Nature Notes and Reminiscences*. It is one thing to have at command a comprehensive knowledge of nature's workings in the wild and quite another to present those conditions in an eminently readable form. Selous, however, succeeded in both, and to a quite unusual degree.

Coloration due to environment

"Although," says he, "there are certain striking exceptions to the general rule (the cock ostrich may be cited as one) yet, broadly speaking, it cannot be gainsaid that living organisms are usually coloured in such a way as to make them difficult of detection by the human eye amongst their natural surroundings." He does not, however, believe that this harmonious chromatic arrangement, so to speak, between animals and their natural habitat has been brought about by the need of protection from enemies, but rather by the persistent influence of the colour of their environment. As, moreover, most carnivorous animals seek their prey in the darkness at night and by the aid of scent, it would seem that in such circumstances colour is of no assistance whatever to the potential victim. As a typical example of this Selous draws attention to the southern race of the situtunga and claims that the consistent dull brown of both sexes cannot have been brought about for the express purpose of protection from carnivora. During the daytime they live in water-logged reed-beds and cannot be approached except by wading. At night, however, when they come out to feed on the young grass they are often killed by leopards and sometimes by lions, and their actual colour in darkness can be of no more use by way of shielding them from their keen-scented feline foes than if it were black or red or grey. "To me," writes Selous, "it seems far more probable that the situtunga has gradually lost the stripes and spots of the ancestral form from which it is derived, and assumed

a uniform dull brown because it has lived for ages amongst reed-beds of one drab monotonous complexion, than because an unbroken brown coat affords it special immunity from carnivorous foes."

Perhaps the most striking illustration of the effect of environment on animal life postulated by Selous is that of the bontebok. This now rare antelope which was such a conspicuous and picturesque figure in the neighbourhood of the Cape when the early Dutch settlers arrived is probably the most brilliantly coloured of all large mammals. The entire neck, chest, sides and underparts of the head and the sides of the body are of a rich dark brown, and the central part of the back is of a beautiful purple lilac. In strong contrast to these rich dark colours the whole front of the face, a good sized patch on the rump, the whole belly and the legs are of a pure and brilliant white. "In life, and when they are in good condition," says Selous, "a wonderful sheen plays and shimmers over the glossy coats of these beautifully attired animals which fully atones for the want of grace and refinement in the shape of their heads and the heavy build of their bodies. A practical acquaintance with the very limited extent of country in which the bontebok has been evolved," continues Selous, "makes it quite impossible for me to believe that the extraordinarily brilliant colouring of this species of antelope can have been gradually developed in order to make it inconspicuous and therefore difficult of detection by carnivorous animals."

Bontebok and Blesbok

He then goes on to compare the bontebok with its near ally the blesbok. In the blesbok the wonderful contrasts of livery which characterise the bontebok are not so clearly defined, but the difference, he claims, is only superficial. The general body colour of the blesbok is dark brown but not so dark as on the neck and sides of the bontebok. Moreover, the delicate purply-lilac of the back in the latter is altogether absent from the former. In the blesbok, too, the colour of the rump just above the tail (which in the bontebok is snow-white) is brown, though of a paler shade than any other part of the body. In the blesbok, again, the white face 'blaze' is not continuous from the horns downwards as in the bontebok, but is interrupted above the eyes by a line of brown. Another variation is that the legs of the blesbok are not so white as in the bontebok, and whilst the horns of the latter are always perfectly black, in the former they are of a greenish tinge. In a word, the differences between these two species of antelope are confined to the intensity of the pigmentation on various parts of their hides, the bontebok being much more brilliantly presented than the blesbok. Selous's theory is that the wonderfully rich and varied coloration of the bontebok has been brought about purely through the influence of its exceptional environment. The plains on which it lived lie along the shore of a ravishing blue sea, and at certain seasons of the year the earth was carpeted with multi-hued wild



Game in Mashonaland in 1891.

flowers which grew in such profusion that they gave an arresting tapestry of colour to the landscape. Selous was convinced that the influence of environment has played a greater part than is generally believed in the evolution of colour in living organisms. He regards the blesbok as a faded bontebok—faded because ages ago the bontebok moved northwards through the Karroo into countries beyond the Orange and the Vaal rivers where, in place of the glowing and vivid hues of the sea and the rapturous landscape around Cape Agulhas, where they originated, they encountered dull monochromatic territorial conditions which, in the course of time, had the effect of modifying their ultra-colourful appearance.

One species of lion

About the occasionally debated question of the lion's mane Lydekker claims that the black-maned and tawny-maned specimens belong, in most cases at any rate, to distinct local races. Selous, however, contends that you cannot classify all African lions under those two heads. There is, he maintains, only one species, and "out of fifty skins scarcely two will be found exactly alike in the colour and length of the mane." Moreover, he thinks that the mane must be a reversion to an ancestral adornment first evolved in a cold climate, probably that of Western Europe. The lion is presumed to have entered Africa before that continent was separated from Europe by the Mediterranean Sea. It was, in fact, not uncommon in South-Eastern Europe during the time of Herodotus, the Greek historian, in the fifth century B.C. Even in the third century B.C. they were to be found in Macedonia. It is significant that lion cubs from Africa which are brought up in the comparatively cool and damp climate of Western Europe nearly always grow fine manes.

In the hotter parts of Africa lions usually have very scanty manes, whereas in the cold high plateaux good manes are developed. This seems to indicate a reversion to an ancestral type first evolved, we may presume, in Pleistocene times, in cold and rigorous conditions.

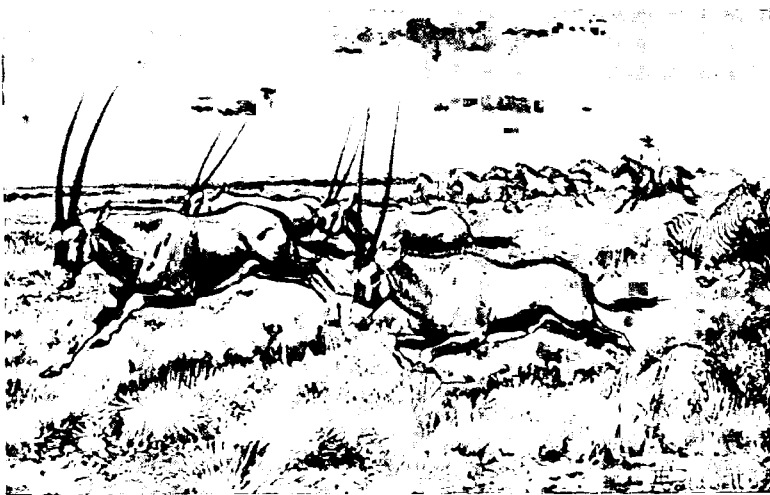
Water in desert tubers

The problem of animals in sun-scorched arid desert lands and drought-stricken areas to secure water is one that engaged the attention of Selous on many occasions. It has sometimes been said, though not, we venture to think, by naturalists, that giraffes, for example can exist without water, and the fact that during the dry season, when exposed day after day to a sun-heat of 165° Fahrenheit "when one's nails become as brittle as glass," they find sustenance in leaves and twigs which contain little moisture, lends superficial colour to the assertion. However, Selous, who sometimes hunted with Bushmen, tells us that whenever those wild men detected a certain thin grass-like leaf protruding from the ground, they immediately squatted down and started to dig vigorously in the soft sandy soil. Soon they would unearth large white tubers, sometimes as big as a man's head, and looking like turnips. These tubers, we are told, contain as much water as a juicy orange and often constitute the Bushman's only drink. Desert-loving antelopes, it is believed, dig up these tubers by pawing the yielding sand and thus, during rainless periods, obtain all the water they require. The giraffe, deprived of surface water, may likewise get sufficient moisture in this manner.

Selous formed a very high opinion of the Masarwa Bushmen, with some of whom he hunted in, among other places, the Southern Kalahari. One of them, a pure-blooded Korana from the Orange



Matabele tribesmen spearing a cattle-killing lion.



Burchell's zebra and gemsbok in South Africa 70 years ago.

River who came to him as a servant in 1871 remained his follower for 25 years, and, says Selous, "he was always most faithful, and in his younger days a very good elephant hunter." The Masarwas originally killed game with bow and arrow, the latter being made of light reeds into the ends of which bone heads, smeared with a sticky poison, were inserted. These primitive methods are now being discarded in favour of modern devices. However wasted and apparently near death from starvation Bushmen may be (and that is not infrequently their lot), once they discover a dead animal they recover flesh and regain their strength in a marvelously short time. Selous tells us they are as omnivorous as bears. Every kind of animal from an elephant to a mouse, often moreover in an advanced stage of decomposition, is devoured with apparent relish. Snakes, lizards, flying ants, frogs, locusts, honey, ostrich eggs, nestling birds and various kinds of berries, bulbs and roots—all are acceptable to a people to whom it is more than an aphorism to say that they never know from where the next meal is coming. They are wonderful trackers, but to be seen at their best they must be hungry but not starving. At such times they are capable of astonishing feats of endurance. A Bushman has been known to run on elephant spoor in front of a horse for a distance of 80 miles, only very occasionally slowing down to a walk for a few minutes. During this remarkable marathon he was without food and sleep, and showed not the least sign of exhaustion. Selous says that he always employed Bushmen as gun-bearers, and better men it would be impossible to find, for not only were they always cool and self-possessed in any emergency, but the quickness of their eyesight and their intimate knowledge of animals gave them a distinct advantage over the staunchest of gun-bearers from Bantu tribes.