

THE GAME POLICY IN AFRICA

By G. F. SAYERS

THOSE who have been concerned with the game laws in British Tropical Africa in the last thirty years will, if they look back, find that there has taken place a gradual, but profound, change of policy on the part of the local governments in the matter of game preservation. It is not that the letter of the law has changed so much as the spirit in which the law is interpreted.

Before the last war, the game ordinances in the British African Protectorates were administered with a fair degree of strictness. They prescribed, generally, that game must not be shot except under licence: they laid down stiff penalties for poaching and they debarred natives from taking out licences to shoot game unless under a special dispensation which, in practice, was rarely, if ever, exercised. But there was more to it than that. There was, on the whole, a close liaison between the Game Preservation Departments and the Provincial Administration, without whose sympathy and assistance there could be no enforcement of the law, for the reason that the game scouts were far too few to patrol the vast areas in which the game roamed.

Attached to the Provincial Administration, on the other hand, was a large number of irregular native police, or tribal *askaris*, who were ubiquitous and observant, so that, provided that their active support could be counted upon, some supervision could be exercised in districts where the game was numerous. Whether such support was forthcoming depended on the personality of the District Officer. If to him poaching was anathema, he could "ginger up" his native staff to keep their eyes open and to report breaches of the law; if he were apathetic or indifferent, poaching could proceed unhindered.

The District Officers of those days, recruited largely from the landed gentry class in this country, instinctively regarded poaching with disfavour. They might have a sneaking regard for the resource and daring of the poacher himself as, in their younger days, they had had for the village poacher at home; but, just as their fathers had been wont to give the offender two months without the option and to view the unexplained possession of a rabbit skin as conclusive evidence of guilt, so their sons in Africa followed their example, though, in that case, it was ivory or a kudu skin rather than a rabbit's pelt that furnished the proof. The rules of the game were simple and well understood by the native. He took his chance, and, if one of the tribal police came across the skin of an antelope pegged out

to dry in his village, he generally owned up and paid the penalty cheerfully.

Needless to say, with such wide areas to cover, the opportunity of catching a poacher in the act were rare. Once and once only did I do so myself. Then, when patiently stalking a bush-buck, I saw the grass ahead of me move, not hither and thither as with the wind, but slowly and purposefully. Crouching some twenty yards on was a native, nude except for a girdle round his loins, and about to loose a poisoned arrow from his bow. Unable to resist the temptation, I fired well above him into the animal's shoulder and dropped the bush-buck in its tracks. My poacher friend was so taken aback that he remained, like a statue, where he was, and I had not the heart to do more than confiscate

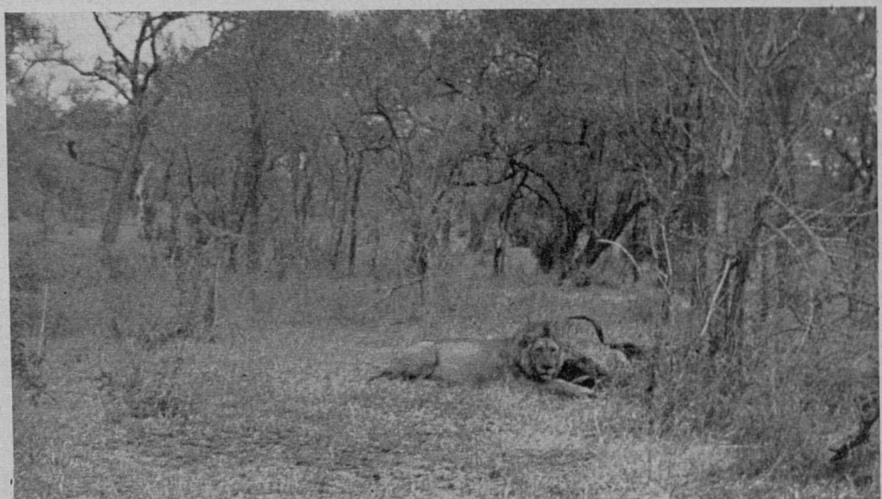
patina of age and were then brought in as "found ivory" for which a reward could be claimed. Who could prove that they were not part of some forgotten cache hidden before law and order was established?

This same tradition of the sanctity of the game laws was responsible for their observance by the District Officer himself. Stationed "in the blue," had he been so minded he had every opportunity to shoot what I served were scrupulous in adhering to the law and in seeing that their staff did the same. One of my predecessors, it is true, was wont to obey it in the letter rather than the spirit. A keen elephant hunter who generally managed to go on leave with a handsome sum from the sale of ivory, he was, however, canny with his cash and did not relish the idea of paying for an expensive elephant licence unless certain of his quarry.

So, when he went on safari, he took with him one of the elephant licence books. Hearing of elephant in the neighbourhood, he would make out a cheque for the prescribed amount before leaving camp and put the licence book in his pocket. After a while he would strike fresh spoor, follow it up and there in the thorn bush he would sight an old bull whose tusks, he estimated, would run to 80lb. apiece. Out came the book and a fountain pen. Squatting on his haunches he tested the wind with a trickle of sand in one hand, and scribbled his signature to the licence with the other, letting the book slide to the ground, to be retrieved at leisure, he would pick up his rifle, sight and fire.

The old beast fell, shot through the brain, and X. had complied with the law. But X. was the exception, and while not all Administrative Officers were paragons, I think that, on the whole, they were punctilious in keeping the law and in using their powers to see that it was kept.

There came to be, as will be shown, other good reasons for relaxing the strictness with which the game laws were administered; but a potent factor was a change in the source from which candidates for the African Administrations were recruited in the post-war era. Up to 1914 they were, as has been said, largely drawn from the landed class, and came to Africa with an inherited love of country life and no little proficiency in field sports; but, with the great expansion of the African Services and the improvement in conditions, the net of recruitment was cast more widely and attracted a type of man with higher academic qualifications and less bucolic tastes. The young



LION FEASTING ON A KUDU BULL

his arrows and tell him to make himself scarce, which he did without hesitation.

The difficulty of bringing offenders to book was more marked when it came to ivory, for it was the practice of local governments to pay a reward for all ivory found in the bush and brought in to district headquarters. This practice dated from the early days of administration, when game laws were non-existent and when traffic in ivory was profitable both to the natives who shot the elephant and to the Arab and European traders and adventurers who bought the tusks and exported them to their profit. Long after laws for game preservation had been enacted, ivory so unearthed was brought in to the Government which, by paying in rewards a fraction of its value and selling the tusks, added considerably to its revenue. But this arrangement, of course, provided every opportunity for abuse. Tusks from newly-killed elephant would be buried for a time by the poacher so as to develop the

District Officer took his career more seriously and found, too, that routine tied him to his office. When he travelled, he did so by car, and lacked the opportunities, which his seniors had enjoyed, of touring his district on foot, with leisure to study nature. To him, often a townsman by birth and upbringing, the game laws seemed a relic of feudalism out of keeping with the twentieth century, and his sympathy, more often than not, was with the native who pleaded that he had killed off the game in defence of his property. For this view there was a good deal to be said.

Hitherto the African had depended almost entirely on a subsistence agriculture. In the early "twenties," however, development was the order of the day, and the production of economic crops, such as maize, cotton, coffee, etc., was urged by local governments intent on increasing exports and resources. European settlement, too, expanded, with the result that large areas were carved out of the bush and put under cultivation by white as well as black.

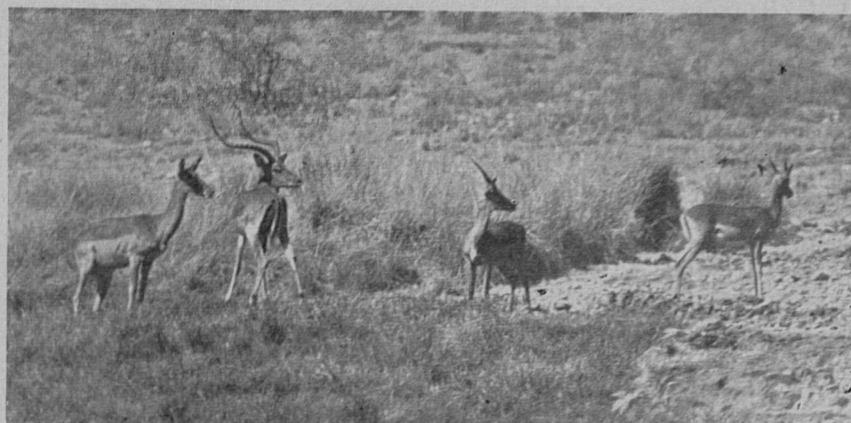
Like the Administrative Officer, the type of settler began to change, for the post-war immigrant was more set on making an economic success of his land than his predecessors, who, on the whole, had more money and more leisure. The settled areas started to provide

amenities, such as golf, polo, trout-fishing, and an evening stroll with a gun gave place to an evening at the Club. From the white highlands the larger game had already withdrawn, and, from now on, the smaller species and even the birds were shot up and shot off. In the native areas, as the land was cleared so the game retreated, but it hovered in the fringe and, when night fell, would return to nibble the maize and generally create havoc in the young plantations. Elephant were the worst culprits. The campaign in German East Africa had often been waged in the sides of their reserves, and they had scattered over the countryside. Often between dusk and dawn they would wreck a cornfield or trample underfoot a patch of cotton, and a month's work would be ruined in the space of a night.

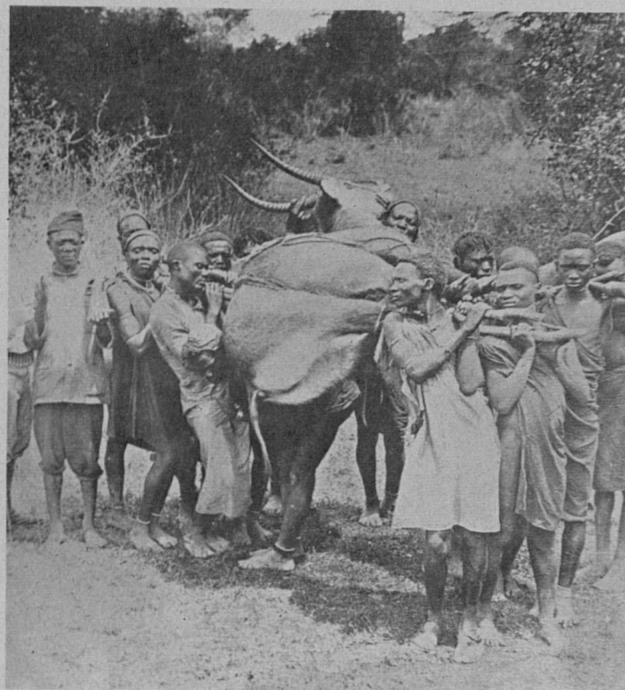
It was clear that the strict preservation of game was incompatible with a policy of agricultural development, and the Departments of Agriculture and the Provincial Administration joined forces in denouncing the ravages of the game and in demanding their elimination from cultivated areas. And so it came about that reluctant game wardens were ordered to organise measures of control and even of extermination. Hampered by lack of funds, as indeed are most African experiments, first steps were not very successful since they consisted for the most part in advertising for persons who would shoot a fixed number of elephant on a fifty-fifty basis: in other words, one task was to be handed to Government while the other remained the shooter's property.

As might have been foreseen, the invitation attracted a number of "down-and-outs" whose sole interest was to make as much out of it as possible, and who spent their time in tracking down big bulls in the heart of the forest instead of dealing with marauders living on the fringe of the cultivated area. It was not long before these adventurers were replaced by skilled shots, who were engaged on a salaried basis and had no share in the ivory. Their activities were not limited to elephant, and they dealt equally with buffalo, hippo, wild pig and other species which had become tiresome to life and property. Indeed, if a man-eating lion appeared in the vicinity of the village, the chief would send an S.O.S. to the nearest Cultivation Protector, as these hard-worked officials came to be designated.

This organised control of marauding game became a recognised feature of the game policy of the African governments. It was accompanied by a spontaneous feeling on the part of magistrates that a plea that an animal had been shot in defence of crops was entitled to succeed in any prosecution for illegal shooting of



IMPALA ON THE ALERT READY TO TAKE FLIGHT



game, which meant, in practice, that no case could be sustained. The Administration, indeed, went further, and maintained that natives had never lost their age-long right to hunt and kill game for food, provided they used the weapons which their forbears had used, i.e. the spear or the bow and arrow. Unless, then, there came to light flagrant cases of poaching, such as organised drives against game in uninhabited areas, the Provincial Administration were reluctant to take action or, in their judicial capacity, to convict.

Now the value of a law depends on the extent to which it is supported by public opinion, and public opinion in Africa had reached the conclusion that the game must retire from cultivated areas and be confined to sanctuaries wherein it would not interfere with economic development. This retreat before the march of civilisation is inevitable, though to those of us who remember an Africa in which the game was ubiquitous it is rather a tragedy. In those days, the morning's march would be enlivened by the sight of a herd of hartebeeste moving slowly over the plain, of impala hurdlng across the park-like savannah or of a waterbuck standing motionless on the river bank; or it might be disturbed by the crash of a rhino through the thorn bush or the bark of a hippo in the pool.

But those were the days when we travelled slowly on foot and had leisure to observe; now we whisk along the road by car or speed by air five thousand feet above ground. So perhaps the departure of the game is not so great a loss as it might be. And there is this to be thankful for, namely that, in the sanctuaries or national parks which are in the process of creation, the game will find a permanent home; for the certainty that it must be ejected from cultivated districts has stiffened the popular determination that the reserves shall be inviolate, and that the game shall be preserved for us, our children and our children's children.

NATIVES BRINGING IN A WATERBUCK AND (below) RHINOCEROS IN A TYPICAL SETTING

