

Chicago Natural History Museum

FOUNDED BY MARSHALL FIELD, 1893

Roosevelt Road and Lake Shore Drive, Chicago 5

TELEPHONE: WABASH 2-9410

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Jungle Hide-and-Seek . . .

GORILLAS AND ELEPHANTS PLAY IT ROUGH

BY AUSTIN L. RAND
CURATOR OF BIRDS

Since January, 1951, Harry A. Beatty, of New York, has been collecting birds and other animals for this Museum in Gaboon and Moyen Congo, French territory just north of the lower Congo River. In recent letters to the Museum he characterized the location of his camp near the coast as a "wonderland of swamp forest." Officials and missionaries in the area were helpful and hospitable.

Forestry is a major industry in Gaboon, though the scarcity of natives has necessitated importing labor from the nearby colonies. Thus, getting local help for zoological collecting proved almost impossible. Offers of forestry stations and lumber camps as quarters have been a great help to Mr. Beatty. The dense, rank vegetation makes collecting difficult. It is one thing to shoot a forest bird at a glimpse after playing hide and seek for half an hour, and another to find the downed specimen.

Transportation is always a difficulty in scantily inhabited country, and this is true of Gaboon. A few roads, impassable in the rains, supplement river travel that may

become difficult when the water is low in the dry season. On one river trip, after Beatty waited days for a boat, it came at last, towing a barge-load of soldiers. Spinal meningitis broke out and they were all quarantined for ten days. However, progress has reached these regions, too, and airplane transport is available to some places.

Gaboon is lowlands, like most of West Africa. But when Beatty was camped inland he was within reach of a few low wooded hills where there has never been adequate zoological collecting, and this leads to hope that he will find this a new station for some of the birds typical of mountain habitats and otherwise known in West Africa only on Mount Cameroon. It was near here that the rare lyre-tailed honey guide, known from but twelve specimens, was heard by Beatty, although he had not collected it at the time of writing. One can be directly below this bird that lives in the tops of forest trees, hear its flight song, and yet not catch a glimpse of it through the dense foliage overhead.

GORILLAS SPREAD TERROR

An American intent on photographing gorillas visited Beatty at one camp. Beatty himself has encountered gorillas. He writes, "I have had several terrifying experiences and hope they are the last. In three weeks I saw two men with feet and hands crushed and the last man had his scalp ripped off and the muscles of arms and back ripped away by a huge gorilla. He died."

Beatty tells of rains and droughts but he seems nevertheless to like West Africa. He writes, "A white Christmas is lovely to look at but I prefer the endless spaces of Plateau Bateke. I killed a buffalo and had a cheerful season with the four French families here." In this locality he got a black-and-yellow weaver bird known from but a single specimen in 1930, and a tiny lark described from Ruwenzori. He also investigated the hybridization of two other black-and-yellow weaver birds. A number of French residents are interested in the birds, and their advice is helpful. From one Beatty obtained a collection of about 250 skeletons of birds that will be a very useful addition to the Museum's Division of Anatomy. An all-black forest guinea fowl is included among rarities from this forest area.

The Oubangui River, the tributary of the Congo that divides French from Belgian Congo, was visited by Beatty when the water was low. Never less than a mile and a half wide, it is dotted with islands and sandbars on which many ducks, geese, and ibises rest. These birds come in the dry season from the Lake Chad area to the north on the edge of the Sahara.

Traveling by motor boat for a time with the local physician, Beatty and the doctor stayed nights in natives' huts, which are

THIS MONTH'S COVER

The famous fighting elephants in Stanley Field Hall require a "beauty treatment" with a vacuum cleaner on an average of twice a year. The story of how this and other "housekeeping" problems of the Museum are solved is told on page 6. The elephants were collected in Africa in 1906 by the late Carl E. Akeley, who mounted them shortly thereafter. The group remains to this day one of the Museum's outstanding exhibits.

few and far between in this forested country. Beatty writes, "One night elephants paraded near our hut and squealed unpleasantly. . . . A huge elephant rubbed his broadside across the corner of my hut, ripped it away, and the roof fell in. It was a frightful experience in the middle of the night."

On the sandbars of a river, Beatty located breeding colonies of the red-billed swallow. This swallow is all blackish. Its bill is large for a swallow and bright red. For years little was known about this bird, and it was thought to be the sole representative in Africa of the Asiatic wood swallows. Then it was discovered nesting in the Congo, its habits learned, and specimens dissected, and it seems to be a true swallow. By visiting the colony at night, where the birds had placed their nests at the ends of burrows dug by themselves in sandbars, Beatty found that both male and female sleep in the nest burrow—the female with the eggs or young, the male in the entrance where he slips away when disturbed.

I have finished listing the birds so far sent by Beatty and find 308 species represented. The specimens provide us with range extensions, examples of many rare species known from only a few specimens and at least one species that is probably new to science. In adding new birds to our collection the West African Expedition rates very high.

Many Beduin Arabs of North Africa believe in the existence of demons (affrits) who are supposed to carry out evil designs under direction of a chief. Primitive rock engravings and even the desert itself are attributed to these demons. Divination and omens are seriously regarded and the evil eye is greatly feared. As protection against these influences, the people resort to amulets and tattooing.

Manufacture of glass ornaments from melted-down European glass is one of the rare occupations of West African tribes. Some examples are in Hall D.



Rand, Austin Loomer. 1952. "Gorillas and Elephants Play It Rough." *Bulletin* 23(8), 2-2.

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