Field Museum News

Published Monthly by Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

Vol. 5 FEBRUARY, 1934 No. 2

RARE BONGO, COLLECTED BY WHITE-COATS EXPEDITION, IN HABITAT GROUP

By Wilfred H. Osgood
Curator, Department of Zoology

Africa, which is headquarters for antelopes, produces so many kinds that all of them cannot be shown even in such a large display as that provided for in Carl E. Akeley Memorial Hall (Hall 22). There are some, however, that are so interesting and so striking in appearance that they demand admittance, and in all plans for expansion space is reserved for them. One of these is the rare and beautiful species known as the bongo, which now is represented by a magnificent group, completed in January, specimens for which were obtained by Captain Harold A. White of New York and the late Major John Coats of Ayrshire, Scotland, on their African expedition for Field Museum in 1930.

The bongo is the most brilliantly colored of all antelopes or, for that matter, of all hoofed mammals. It is, in fact, a veritable harlequin among large animals. Its body color of bright tawny-ochraceous is almost blazing in intensity and against this are ten or more vertical white stripes very sharply defined. Further contrast is offered by rich markings on the head and legs. It is unusually massive in form, standing about four feet high at the shoulder and perhaps reaching a weight of 500 pounds.

One of the first to call attention to the bongo was the famous traveler Paul du Chaillu, who found it in the forests of West Africa in 1856 and brought complete skins to Europe. These doubtless came from native sources, and it was not until more than fifty years later that the animal was actually killed by a white man. Meanwhile, it was thought to be wholly confined to West Africa, but it is now known to range eastward through the forest zone to the upper Congo region and even to restricted mountain forests in Kenya Colony. Slight distinctions have been drawn between eastern and western specimens, but the general characters are the same and the animal is so rare that conclusions must be regarded as tentative.

Few animals are more difficult to hunt than this one. It frequents bamboo thickets and dense forest undergrowth where following it quickly or quietly is nearly impossible. Natives capture it in deadfalls and concealed pits along its trails, but white men rarely find it. In spite of its striking coloration, it is not easy to see, for the broken pattern, like that of the tiger, has a concealing effect against a background of vines, branches and alternating light and shade. The hunter's feeling in regard to it is well indicated by the following quotation from a letter sent from Africa by Captain White shortly after the specimens for the group were taken:

"In all of my hunting experience, I have never hunted quite so hard nor had more breaks of good luck than we did the first two weeks on the Aberdares. The bongo live there at an altitude of 10,000 feet in the thick bamboo forest where the sun hardly ever shines. It is raining there most of the time, but we got a break in the weather and did get some dry spells.

"After one week of hunting twelve hours a day in that terrible forest, an old native tracker brought us into the heart of the bamboo forest where we discovered an old salt lick that his father had told him about and which had been lost to the younger generation. Here, early one morning, we saw a herd of over thirty bongo just entering the forest, and we picked our female and young yearling out of this group. Several days later, after waiting all night at this lick in terrible cold and rain, we shot a large bull just coming down to drink."

Group of Bongo in Carl E. Akeley Memorial Hall

These rare antelopes of Africa are seldom seen, either in museums, or alive in their homeland. The specimens in this exhibit were collected by the Harold White–John Coats African Expedition of Field Museum.

Although the similarity is not very close, the bongo is probably more nearly related to the eland than to the smaller bushbucks and harnessed antelopes with which it was once classified. The eland inhabits open country or light scrub, while the bushbucks are forest dwellers. The bongo combines some of the structural characters and some of the habits of both. It shares with the eland the possession of horns in both sexes, the large size, the striped body, and the long bovine tail. Like the eland, also, it has the herding habit, whereas the bushbucks and forest antelopes in general are more solitary. Therefore it is likely that it is descended from a plains-inhabiting ancestor.

The Museum's group was prepared by Staff Taxidermist C. J. Albrecht. The painted background is by Staff Artist Charles A. Corwin.

FOSSIL MARSUPIAL DISCOVERED BY MUSEUM PALEONTOLOGIST

An important scientific discovery—a hitherto unknown South American prehistoric animal of large size and most unusual physical characteristics, which appears to have been one of the greatest killers of its time, some two million years ago—has been announced by Professor Elmer S. Riggs, Associate Curator of Paleontology at Field Museum.

The animal, recently described in a published report for the information of other scientists, was discovered in the Argentinian province of Catamarca by Professor Riggs when he was in the field as leader of the Marshall Field Paleontological Expedition to Argentina. The skulls and parts of skeletons of the species brought to the Museum are the only specimens in the world so far as is known to date.

Like the well-known sabertooth tiger which died out a few thousand years ago, the new animal has long pointed tusks which must have made it a formidable attacker, but its further peculiarity lies in the fact that it carried its young in a pouch like such marsupial animals as the kangaroo and the opossum. It has therefore been named *Thylacosmilus* (marsupial sabertooth) by Mr. Riggs. The animal had a massive head, and was larger in body than a modern North American mountain lion.

The sabertooth marsupial lived in South America long before the sabertooth tiger, which found its way to most parts of the world, reached that continent.

Among the contemporary creatures inhabiting the world with the newly discovered fossil animal were the giant sloths and the armored glyptodonts, upon which the marsupial may have preyed.