

EXPEDITION LEADER TELLS STORY OF EXPLORATION IN THE JUNGLES OF BRITISH GUIANA

(Editor's Note:—The December issue of FIELD MUSEUM NEWS carried a brief story of the unfortunate accident at King William Rapids in British Guiana which resulted in the loss of a boat and many of the specimens of the Sewell Avery Zoological Expedition. Recently Mr. Blake, the leader, returned to Chicago with more than 60 per cent of his collection, which in itself is sufficient to enable the Museum to pronounce the expedition a success. The salvaging of his collections was accomplished under extremely difficult circumstances, which might easily have dissuaded one of less experience and determination. Mr. Blake's own story follows.)

By EMMET R. BLAKE
Assistant Curator of Birds

One of the most inaccessible as well as scientifically little-known areas in all South America is the Brazilian frontier of British Guiana, recently visited and explored by the Sewell Avery Zoological Expedition of Field Museum. It is a region of rugged mountains, rushing streams, and inviolate solitude. A trackless and almost impenetrable jungle blankets many thousands of square miles, much of it unexplored and avoided even by aboriginal Indians.

Access to most of the area can be gained only by ascending the rapid-strewn Courantyne River, which forms the boundary between Dutch and British Guiana, and its turbulent tributary, the New River. This is a dangerous small boat journey of approximately 600 miles. The mechanical difficulties of river transport are so formidable that no scientific expedition had ever succeeded in penetrating to the frontier, and thus a large area remained entirely unknown to biologists.

With the advent of the recent Brazilian-British Guiana boundary survey, however, the frontier became temporarily accessible to properly organized independent organizations. The discovery of mountains on the boundary, greater than any yet mapped in this region, and the realization that the hinterland would again become inaccessible with the withdrawal of the Boundary Commission, led to the organization of the Field Museum expedition which accomplished the first zoological reconnaissance of the region. The undertaking was made possible by the generosity and interest of Mr. Sewell Avery, a Trustee of the Museum, who in 1938 sponsored this and three other expeditions.

BY AIRPLANE TO THE INTERIOR

Preliminary arrangements were made by cable for the deposit of supplies, boats and equipment at strategic points along the river by attachés of the Boundary Commission as they descended to the coast. Mr. Richard Baldwin, an experienced Commission aide, was retained as assistant for the Museum expedition, and with twelve Indian

and negro boatmen, he awaited the writer's arrival at King Frederick William IV Falls.

On August 12 the writer disembarked at Georgetown, capitol of British Guiana, with six hundred pounds of carefully selected collecting and field equipment. Mr. Habib Rasool, a capable young East Indian native collector trained by the 1937 Stanley Field British Guiana Expedition, was signed on as taxidermist and did notable work throughout. A small hydroplane, owned and piloted by Mr. Arthur Williams, an American aviator formerly employed by the Boundary Commission, was chartered, and on August 15 the party was flown into the interior.

The route of our flight first led almost due south, following closely the erratic course of the Demerara River for about 100 miles, then southeastward over the unbroken jungle to the desolate Berbice savannahs and on to the Courantyne itself. The well-ordered coastal rice and sugar plantations quickly gave way to second growth bush and finally to a primeval forest which extended without a break as far as the eye could reach in every direction. During the course of our cross-country flight, a rainstorm was encountered which forced the plane low, and for many miles the tiny seaplane skimmed the tree-tops.

"WHITE WATER" AHEAD

A brief pause for refueling was made at Wonatobo Falls, 150 miles up the Courantyne River. A single native boat crew, the last of the Boundary Commission force remaining in the interior, was on hand to assist. Once more in the air and speeding southward, I saw that the river was becoming increasingly turbulent. Literally hundreds of islands studded its course. White water indicated the presence of countless rapids which had to be run later by boat when the river was at a lower and more dangerous stage.

The flight from Wonatobo to King Frederick William IV Falls, where the expedition boat crew awaited us, required forty-five minutes, but saved three weeks of travel by river. We landed on the river half a mile above the falls and were soon comfortably installed in a bush camp on the Dutch shore. With the departure of the plane at noon, our last means of communication or assistance from the outside world was irrevocably lost until we reached the coast more than three months later.

In order to reach the frontier and maintain the expedition there, supplies and equipment sufficient for fifteen men for possibly four months had to be relayed up the river. The expedition's 32-foot boat, *Oronoque*, was of "greenheart" plank construction, with a capacity of 4,000 pounds. She was propelled by an outboard motor, supplemented by native paddlers. The crew made a preli-

minary trip to Oronoque Base Camp with gasoline and supplies, while Rasool and I remained at King Frederick William IV Falls nine days to obtain a representative lowland collection for comparative purposes.

COLLECTING BY DAY AND NIGHT

Subsequent similar relays transferred all necessary supplies to the head of boat navigation on Itabu Creek, a tributary of the upper New River. There a base camp was established and all expedition personnel, with the exception of the boat captain and bowman, proceeded in dugout canoes to the headwaters. Canoes were abandoned at this point, and the expedition proceeded overland some ten miles by tortuous trail to the watershed which marked the international boundary, our objective. A camp was established at the highest source of water, and collecting began September 20, approximately five weeks after joining the boat crew at King Frederick William IV Falls.

With three collecting guns in daily use, extensive trap lines set for small mammals each night, and several men scouring the forests for specimens of all kinds, the collections grew very rapidly. The camp was always astir at dawn, and rarely were the lanterns dimmed in the taxidermy tent before midnight. Among the notable birds collected were two specimens of the famed harpy eagle, later unfortunately destroyed due to disaster on the river. A number of specimens of cock-of-the-rock, a brilliant orange species regarded as one of the loveliest birds in tropical America, were also taken. Many other birds not previously represented in the Field Museum collections by Guiana specimens were collected, and several species appear to be additions to the fauna of the colony.

Approximately 500 insects, and a representation of vertebrates totaling more than 2,000 specimens of birds, mammals, reptiles and fish, were collected by the expedition before the boundary camp was evacuated. By the middle of October the expedition was in momentary danger of becoming stranded in the hinterland, because Itabu Creek was falling with the advancement of the dry season. Collecting ceased, and the boundary camp was abandoned October 19. The party began the arduous journey to the coast with its collections. Surplus stores and equipment were discarded to facilitate transport over the portages which we faced.

SHOALS PRESAGE DANGER

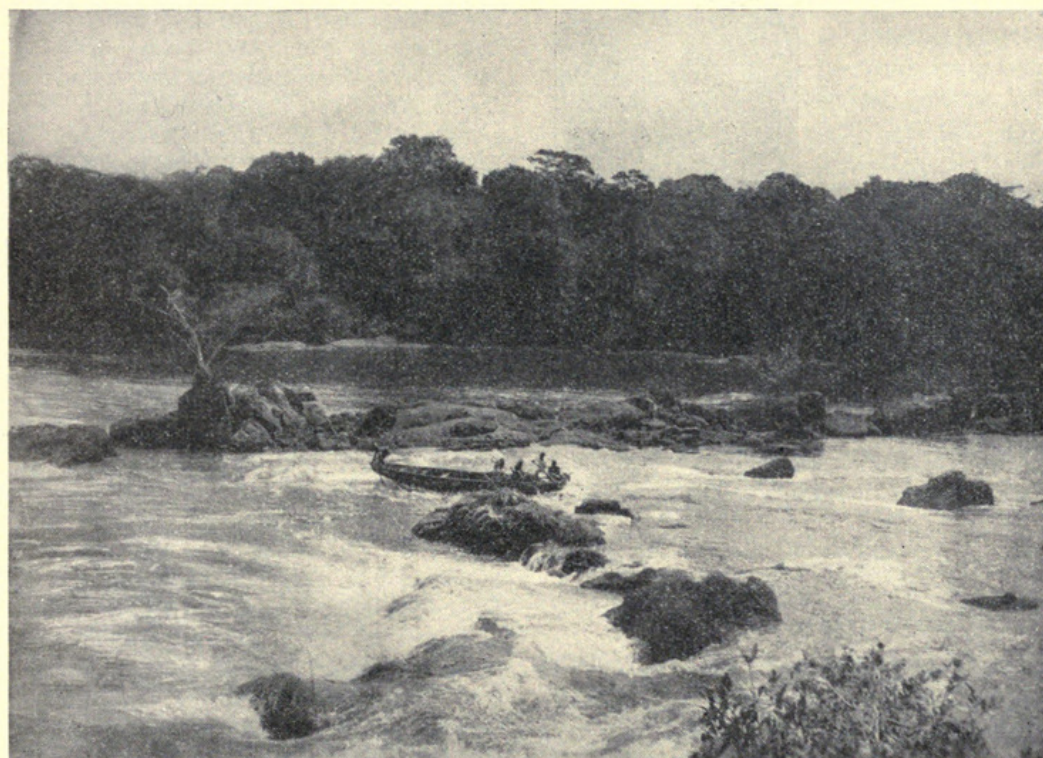
Creeks and rivers had dropped approximately fifteen feet during the month of our sojourn in the mountains. Portions of the streams which were relatively placid during our ascent were now boiling whirlpools and seething rapids. Channels which had been difficult before were now death traps which

required extreme care in navigation, or had to be avoided by strenuous portages. Day by day sudden disaster was an imminent possibility as the boats were run or "streaked" through interminable rapids.

King Frederick William IV Falls is impassable at all seasons. Boats and supplies must be transported overland by way of a mile long portage. Our dug-out canoes were abandoned above the falls and all hands labored for three days with block and tackle, hardwood skids, rollers and levers

serviceable canvas canoe from an old tarpaulin. We also had prepared considerable dried fish for provisions on the journey out. Although we now had four craft, they proved inadequate for men and specimens, so bark was stripped from a large "purple-heart" tree and an Indian "woodskin" was prepared.

Three days below King William Rapids we reached the head of Wonatobo Falls, which necessitated a three-mile portage. The woodskin fell apart there, but finally



Museum Explorers in Small Boat Brave Rapids in a "Lost World"

Photograph made in wilds of British Guiana by Mr. Emmet R. Blake, leader of the Sewell Avery Zoological Expedition, showing the type of dense jungle, and the turbulent water of the Courantyne River, which the expedition had to combat. At one point an expedition boat capsized on a rock in an uncharted channel through the rapids, but all lives were saved, and even the larger part of the collection of specimens was salvaged.

to inch the heavy *Oronoque* over the hilly terrain. Another day was required to repair, caulk and launch her.

DISASTER—AND ESCAPE

On November 1 the *Oronoque*, loaded with specimens, equipment, fifteen men, and supplies for three weeks, once more got under way. About the middle of the afternoon the boat struck a submerged rock while running King William Rapids, and capsized. All of the personnel were miraculously saved by swimming to a rock island in mid-river, but most of the equipment and supplies, and almost half of the specimens were lost.

Two days were spent attempting to find and salvage the boat and stores, but without success. Finally nine men were chosen and sent up river through the jungle to obtain the canoes abandoned above King Frederick William IV Falls. They returned a week later with three dug-outs. Meanwhile, the marooned party, which included Mr. Baldwin and the writer, had dried the specimens salvaged from the rapids, and fabricated a

a *bateau* was made with planks obtained from an abandoned Boundary Commission camp. Several days and nights of paddling brought us to La Tropica, a Dutch police outpost and farthest interior point of civilization on the river. Arrangements were made with police officials to tow our canoes to the coast, some eighty miles distant, and on November 20 the expedition returned to Georgetown. There the salvaged specimens were packed for shipment to Chicago, and the expedition personnel was disbanded.

PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN TO BEGIN THIS MONTH

The James Nelson and Anna Louise Raymond Foundation will present two free programs of motion pictures for children during February. The first, a special program in commemoration of George Washington's birthday, will be given on Wednesday, February 22. The films will portray the life of Washington as a boy and as a man.

On February 25, a week earlier than usual, the Raymond Foundation will begin its spring series of Saturday morning programs. Four films will be shown on this initial program, as follows: "The Grasshopper and the Ant" (musical cartoon in colors, by Walt Disney), "Cartoonland Mystery," "The Plow That Broke the Plain," and "Neptune's Mysteries."

Nine other programs, upon which will be included thirty-seven other films, are to be given on Saturdays during March and April. The complete schedule of these will appear in the March issue of FIELD MUSEUM NEWS.

All programs, including the special one for Washington's birthday, will be given in the James Simpson Theatre, with two showings of each, one beginning at 10 A.M., and one at 11. Children from all parts of Chicago and suburbs are invited, and no tickets are required for admission. The Museum is prepared to receive large groups from schools and other centers, as well as individual children coming either alone or accompanied by parents or other adults. Teachers are urged to bring their classes.

Botanical Project in Europe Makes Notable Progress

Mr. J. Francis Macbride, Associate Curator of the Herbarium, who has been in Europe since 1929 obtaining photographs of type specimens of plants in herbaria of various countries, has returned to his headquarters at the Paris Jardin des Plantes, after several months of work in Geneva and Florence. The Museum recently received from him about 1,500 additional negatives, bringing the total to date in this important collection to 36,000. Prints from these are made available, at cost, to botanists and institutions all over the world, and have proved to be of immense value in connection with various scientific problems.

EXCITING AS A NOVEL—

is *Animals Without Backbones* (An Introduction to the Invertebrates), by Dr. Ralph Buchsbaum, of the Department of Zoology at the University of Chicago.

Dr. Fritz Haas, Curator of Lower Invertebrates at Field Museum, regards this as the best general book on this subject yet published. He says: "Although it may be used as a text book, it can be read for entertainment too, and will prove as enthralling as a story by a master novelist. The illustrations are exceptionally numerous and well chosen."

At the BOOK SHOP of FIELD MUSEUM—\$5.



Reynoso, Alvaro. 1939. "Expedition Leader Tells Story of Exploration in the Jungles of British Guiana." *Field Museum news* 10(2), 4-5.

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