

## ELEPHANTS IN THE MOONLIGHT

by W. H. G. Grant.

**E**ARLY in October this year (1952) I had my first chance after forty years in East Africa of observing wild elephants at very close quarters. My son, who has a roving job in South Masailand, met me in Arusha to take me into camp for one night. His battered safari truck was ready loaded with an equally battered minimum of camp kit. We scorched along the fine Stirling Astaldi tarmac road at a speed which terrified me in view of the vehicle's condition.

At Longido we spent some time depositing hitch-hikers and leaving sundry messages of an official nature; then, already belated, struck the track for Kitumbene Mountain, our destination. This track breaks off the Great North road to the west four miles on the Namanga side of Longido, and for the first 19 miles does just deserve the name of track. After leaving the now abandoned magnesite mine, we drove dead into the setting sun for another 19 miles over a narrow strip of country, from which some of the thorn bushes and larger stones had been cleared.

Just at dusk we reached a spot where large *Acacia spirocarpa* trees and the only green grass seen for many miles, marked the pools at the mouth of the pipeline bringing down the water of the Olgedju Longishu from its gorge four miles up the mountain into the arid steppe. This pipe is a Masai Tribal Authority work of great utility and value.

Kitumbene is one of the so aptly named "Inselberge" of that grand tract of country between the Rift Valley wall and Kilimanjaro. Some others of these island mountains in their ocean of bush and grassland are Gelai, Burko, Mondul, Essimngor and Ol-donyo Lengai.

We found a Dutch stock inspector already camped at the pipe line. He had arrived the day before us, and had spent a restless night. He had had no sleep on account of elephants round the camp, and he warned us that we would get none either. At this time of year the country is dry for many miles, except for the little streams which rise in the dwindling forest caps of the mountains.

The pipe at Kitumbene ends on a ridge of open bush, and a constant flow of clear, cold water, gushing out, is led by small furrows to a series of artificial ponds dug by Wambulu, employed by the Masai. There was copious spoor, and droppings of elephant and rhinoceros at the ponds; but all round the pipe mouth the ground for 30 to 40 yards was a foot-step mass of elephant dung. This gave one an idea of the numbers that must come to the place every night, and we anticipated an interesting experience. Nor were we disappointed. Fortunately the moon was full and the sky clear. At 9.30 the first arrival was a single rhino; but he was evidently shy and watered well below the camp. Little was seen of him.

At 11 p.m. the boys roused us to see a large herd of elephant approaching the ponds. These too were suspicious and did not come very close; but for some time were seen clearly silhouetted against the sky. It was

about 3 a.m. when the real show began. Again the boys woke us, and hurrying out of bed in pyjamas we found some twenty elephants already in the nearest pond, ten yards behind our tent. They bathed and squelched round in the muddy water, ignoring us, our tents, cars and camp fires. The wind certainly was directly in our favour; but at ten yards range even elephants could not fail to see all the strange objects. Thirst obviously accounted for their fearlessness. There was nothing but a light thorn screen between the herd and us. One cow had a very small calf; it could not have been more than a few days old. She was the only one of the herd who looked like being unpleasant. She spread her ears and advanced a few steps in our direction, but to our relief, thought better of it and moved off with the rest. It seemed that the cattle-fouled ponds were used by the elephants for bathing only; for drinking they wanted only the clean water where it actually left the pipe, or in the furrow heads a few yards from it. Here the herd crowded round, milling and shoving each other in their impatience for a turn at the water. The bright moonlight shone on their great wet bodies, and, seen through glasses, even their eyes were visible.

A big bull with one broken tusk (no big ivory was seen) may have been the father of the afore-mentioned baby. I saw its mother lead it up to this bull, who felt the calf over with his trunk, and then lurched away into the dark. I could almost hear him say to the mother "Not a bad youngster, but do keep him to yourself".

A little later another bull appeared from down wind of the camp; and despite a fire not many yards away, stood to drink at one of the furrows. This animal undoubtedly both winded and saw us all, but must have been so thirsty that he did not care. We put out the fire, and I crept up to within 19 yards of him (measured next morning) as he stood and drank. The water in the furrow was only a couple of inches deep so that the elephant had difficulty in filling his trunk. Having filled it, he lifted his head high, curled the trunk into his mouth and squirted the water in; then, with a still further lift of the head, he swallowed. Between each trunkful the elephant swung his head and forepart round to look at me, his ears out like tent flies, but his feet never lifted from the ground. When satisfied at last, he quietly glided off between the cooking pots left outside the kitchen hut, and disappeared without breaking anything.

Next morning before breakfast we took the truck up the mountain track which had been used in laying the pipe line, left it at the intake, and climbed a steep stone-covered ridge to view the forest cap of Kitumbene through glasses. There is still much fine cedar (*Juniperus procera*) left; but fires are regularly eating in and it is but a matter of time before the forest is gone. The lifegiving streams will then become irregular in flow, flooding uselessly in the rainy season, and dwindling to a trickle in the dry. Heavy expenditure on the pipe line will then have been in vain, and thousands of acres of grazing below in the steppe will be lost to the Masai.

Efficient fire protection is the most urgent need, but unfortunately this does not appear to be appreciated by the Masai Administration. Forest guards, fire breaks and early burning are essential, if the Masai of posterity are to inhabit the "Inselberg" terrain.

My son drove me to Namanga Hotel, where I caught the bus to Nairobi, after an unforgettable experience, which could not be surpassed by an expensive visit to any of the famous game haunts such as Amboseli or Mzima Springs.

---

#### SHORT NOTES.

##### GREY PHALAROPE IN KENYA.

The following note has been received from the Hon. Matthew W. Ridley.

"I think it may be of interest to record that on 17 February 1953 I saw a Grey Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) on Lake Elmenteita. The bird was swimming about near the shore at the southern end of the lake and I watched it at short range and could clearly see the thick bill. Although I have never seen this species before, I know the Red-necked Phalarope very well and am in no doubt about the identification."

This would appear to be the first record of the Grey Phalarope in East Africa, although it occurs in numbers during the northern winter in the Gulf of Aden.—Ed.

##### SPOTTED REDSHANK IN KENYA.

On 8 February, 1953, in company with Sir Charles F. Belcher and Mr. A. J. Lewis, I succeeded in collecting a first-winter male Spotted Redshank (*Tringa erythropus*) on Simini's Dam, South Kinangop plateau. What was probably the identical bird was observed on the same dam a few weeks previously.

In the field the Spotted Redshank (in winter plumage) is not unlike a slim Greenshank in general appearance, but with legs and base of bill bright orange-red; it lacks the Common Redshank's white wing patch. The call-note of the Spotted Redshank when disturbed is characteristic, a double liquid "tuoo." Messrs. Praed and Grant (*Birds of Eastern Africa*) do not record this species from Kenya Colony.

John G. Williams;

Coryndon Museum, Nairobi.