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December 1971



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Walia Ibex, *Capra walia*, male 5 — 6 years old, picture taken near
Emyel Gogo, Simien National Park.

Photo by Dr. Bernhard Nievergelt.



His Imperial Majesty Halle Sclassie I

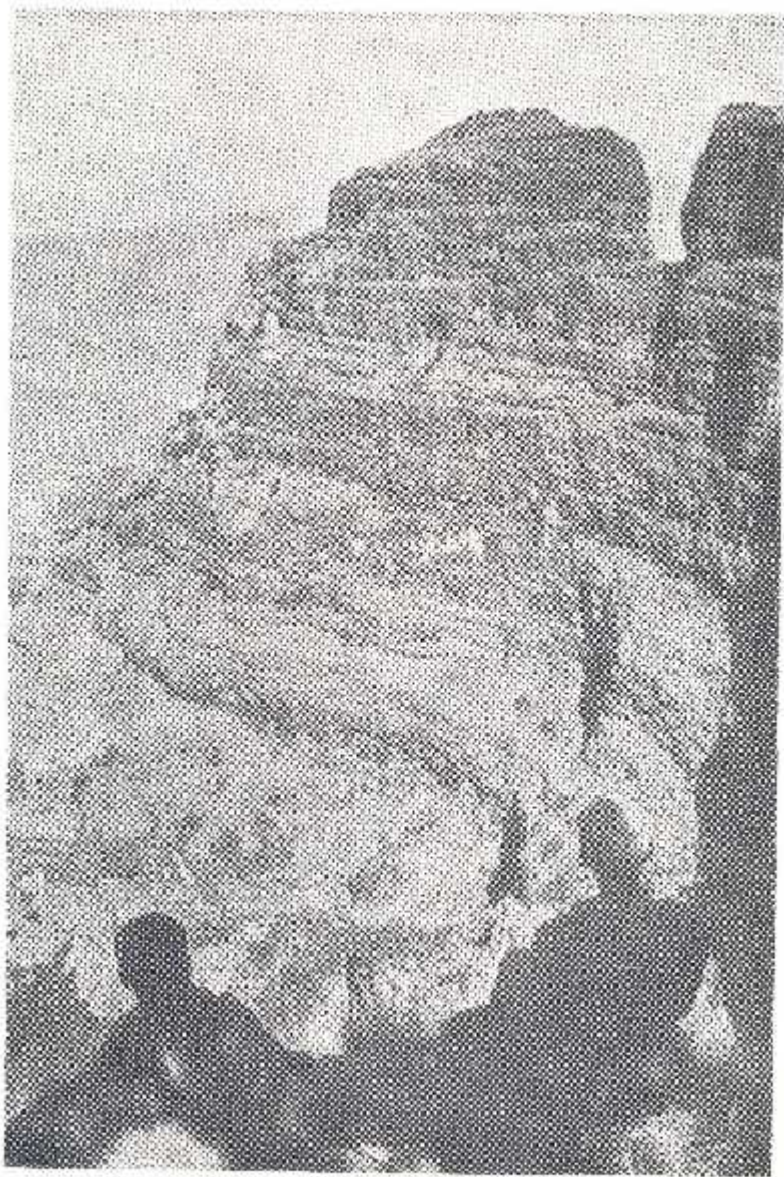
JOURNEY TO THE HIGH SIMIEN

Ethiopia's Newest National Park

by John Blower

The Simien Mountains lie 150 kilometres to the northeast of Lake Tana and to the south of the Takazze River valley, which skirts their eastern foothills as if it were a natural moat guarding the approaches to this scenically magnificent but little known mountain wonderland of northern Ethiopia. Most Ethiopians have probably heard of Simien, but practically none — other than the few hardy Amhara mountaineers who live in the area — have ever been there. Passengers on the last leg of the air journey south from Asmara to Addis Ababa may have their attention drawn to Ras Dashan, Ethiopia's highest mountain, and the sprawling tawny uplands and dark valleys of Simien glimpsed momentarily far beneath the sleek silver wing of their jet. Those who travel by road between Gondar and Axum or Asmara get a truer impression of the grandeur of this great mountain massif, its immense towers and ramparts stretching in a fantastic unbroken wall to the east as they wind laboriously down the Wolchefit Pass and then follow the switchback road towards Adi Akai and the Takazze. But to really appreciate Simien you have to go there yourself on foot or horseback, rather than viewing it from afar.

You start from Devarik, a sprawling and seedy shanty-town of mud and corrugated iron on the main Gondar-Asmara road, barely a kilometre or two from the beginning of the Wolchefit Pass where the road plunges suddenly over the escarpment towards the



View of the Escarpment, Simien National Park.
Photo by John Blower.

distant lowlands. Devarik is the road-head for travellers to Simien. It is here that you must abandon all forms of wheeled transport and set out on the well worn track across the market square, through the last of the Eucalyptus which surround the village and out into the rolling golden-green countryside beyond.

You are now leaving all the trappings of 20th century civilization — though they are not, as yet, much in evidence in Devarik — and heading back into the Middle Ages, for the way of life hereabouts can have changed but little in the past two or three hundred years. You are on your way to the High Simien, with Augur Buzzards and the occasional Lammergeyer already soaring overhead and brightly coloured flowers beside the dusty track. Riders on horses and mules with rifles slung across their backs and women with brightly coloured umbrellas pass by on their way to market in Devarik and exchange friendly greetings. If you enjoy walking you will probably prefer to go on foot, with a mule or two hired after much haggling from some rapacious horse-coper in Devarik, to carry your gear. But if you are not an energetic walker and prepared to struggle up long steep hills at an enervating altitude of 3,000 — 3,500 metres, then take a riding mule or horse at least as a standby. The scrawny knock-kneed nag produced will probably not inspire confidence when first paraded outside the local hostelry in Devarik, but you will probably come to love him dearly after a few hours foot-weary trudging across the mountains.

The journey is not so formidable as it sounds, and is perfectly practicable to any reasonably fit and energetic person prepared to undergo some minor discomfort in return for a unique and thoroughly memorable experience which they can hardly fail to enjoy. It should, however, be stressed that there are — as yet — no hotels, camps or other facilities for visitors in Simien. One must therefore go completely self-contained, with tent —

preferably of the light-weight mountain variety — food, cooking utensils, stove, adequate warm clothing and a good sleeping bag — for it can be bitterly cold at night on the high windswept plateau. A bottle or two of something to fortify the inner man after the sun goes down is also highly desirable and would certainly feature prominently on the writer's list of high altitude necessities.

Simien, we are told by the geologists, is the remains of a much eroded Hawaiian type volcano, and we must take their word for it. However, the traveller on foot or horseback sees it as a series of great rolling grassy plateaux and hogs-back ridges deeply separated by yawning valleys, their dark flanks furred with tree heath (*Erica arborea*) and other vegetation. After the rains these valleys are aflame with flowering plants and shrubs including the ubiquitous St. John's Wort (*Hypericum lanceolatum*) spangled with golden blossom, *Rosa abyssinica* with its virginal white flowers, Clematis, Jasmine, Buddleia, the glorious scarlet and yellow of "red-hot poker" (*Kniphofia*) and many others, which line the rough track like a wild herbaceous border of ever changing variety and fill the air with their scent.

There are a number of delightful little valleys threaded by crystal clear streams, which make ideal camp sites, and where — if not in too much of a hurry — one may decide to break the journey. However, with a reasonably early start from Devarik — often difficult without prior organization of men and mules — one can easily reach Sankaber, which is the gateway to Simien proper, before dark. This part of the journey can be accomplished easily in 4 —5 hours from Devarik, though bird-watchers, botanists, photographers and others wont to dawdle by the wayside should allow six.

It is at Sankaber, which means "plank door", that one first reaches the top of the great Simien escarp-

ment. The view is as unexpected as it is spectacular. It is as if one had suddenly come to the edge of the world, as one peers down in awestruck wonder into nothingness; a great purplish void extending as far as one can see to east and west, in the far recesses of which one may faintly distinguish the yellow and brown mosaic of fields, speck-like clusters of huts or an occasional smudge of smoke. These are the only signs of human presence in a landscape of such immensity that it effectively reduces man and his works to puny and appropriate insignificance.

On arrival at Sankaber you have reached the boundary of the Simien Mountains National Park — newly established by Imperial proclamation on 31st October 1969. With a total area of only some 170 sq kms it is small in comparison with National Parks elsewhere in Africa, but one cannot doubt that it could soon become among the best known of all this continent's many Parks and reserves and — in due course — rank among Ethiopia's most popular and profitable tourist attractions. Simien is unique in both its fauna and flora and in its fantastic scenery, which can be paralleled nowhere in Africa and in but two or three areas elsewhere in the world. As such it is a national possession of great value which merits the protection which it now so urgently needs against the highly destructive human influences with which it is increasingly threatened. It is for these reasons that the Ethiopian Government has — with the support of the World Wildlife Fund, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and other interested bodies — now declared this scenically magnificent area as the country's second National Park.

The crags and caves and narrow grassy ledges of this great Simien escarpment, towering skywards 1,000 — 1,500 metres in sheer walls of pinkish rock, are the home of the Wallia Ibex. The Wallia, as it is generally known, is one of the rarest animals in the world and also one

of the most seriously endangered at the present time. Though Ibex — which are members of the goat family — occur elsewhere, this particular species is unique to Ethiopia, where it survives only in Simien, and where there are estimated to be less than 150 in existence. The protection of this vanishing species would alone have justified the creation of the National Park, though the Park will, in fact, also provide protection for two other unique Ethiopian mammals, the Gelada Baboon and Simien Fox, as well as a rich variety of other interesting wildlife together with the unusual sub-alpine flora of the high moorlands.

The Warden of the new Park, who is living temporarily at Sankaber, is always pleased to see visitors (provided that they are self-contained and do not expect him to find them food or accommodation!), and will gladly advise them on where to go and what to see. Having come thus far one should certainly continue to Geech — a walk or ride of about 2 hours — where the Wildlife Conservation Department has another camp under the charge of an Assistant Warden, and where some stone *tukals* for the use of visitors are now under construction. Geech is at an altitude of 3,500 metres and is a convenient centre for excursions to places of interest such as Mietgogo or Amba Ras — two of the highest points on the escarpment, which offer superb views and also the chance of seeing Walia. For the more ambitious and energetic there are, however, many other possibilities ranging from an expedition to Ras Dashan (two days journey each way) or Deresghie, an arduous but exciting trek round the foot of the escarpment.

The majority of visitors will be content to have reached Geech — which is in the centre of the new Park — and to spend a leisurely day or two exploring the immediate area, looking for Walia, bird-watching, botanizing, riding — or just lounging in the sun and

enjoying the feeling of serenity and blessed isolation from worldly problems which one can find in such places. But whatever one's interests or inclinations it is wise to reckon on a *minimum* of five days actually in the mountains, and preferably a full week — particularly since it takes most people a day or two to get used to the altitude.

The only other information necessary for the prospective visitor concerns the best time of year for such a visit. Fortunately, Simien weather is usually good throughout the long October-May dry season, apart from occasional showers or storms. It is generally considered that the ideal time is just after the end of the rains, in October-November, when the wild flowers are at their best and the Walia tend to favour the upper parts of the escarpment, where they are more easily seen and photographed. However, Simien is a very worthwhile experience at any time of year for anyone who likes to venture off the beaten track, who appreciates wildlife and wild places, and who wishes to see and enjoy some of the most breath-taking mountain scenery in the world.

BUILDING A MUSEUM

The Awash National Park Museum and Information Room.

by Curtis Buer

A Museum for Awash Park was the inspiration of P.W.Hay, Warden of the Park from its first stirrings in February 1966 until March 1969. Consequently, when the more pressing demands of staff housing and track clearing were alleviated, construction of the museum was begun in January 1968.

As scant money was available for this project, it was decided to build a round, grass-roofed *tukal* of mud over a eucalyptus pole frame to house the museum. Starting with a floor plan of nine metres diameter, Mr Hay and I designed the *tukal* with six display booths set around the circular inside wall, divided as the segments of an orange viewed in cross-section. These segment partitions extended only partway to the centre pole, thus leaving the spacious central area open for traffic. Encircling this centre space above was a hanging wall — a gallery for antelope heads and large pictures. A concrete floor was poured and the white-washed interior diffused the sunlight admitted by the single window in each section.

In February Mr Hay put me in charge of acquiring material and arranging displays in the new, spacious, empty *tukal*. He immediately contributed fine black and white prints of the many animals he had photographed in his two years at the Park. These photos, together with informative notes, were mounted on the walls to

assist visitors in wildlife identification. Then Dr Lagen gave us numerous duplicate specimens of mounted birds, antelope heads and horns from the Natural History Museum of Haile Selassie I University. The Museum was under way!

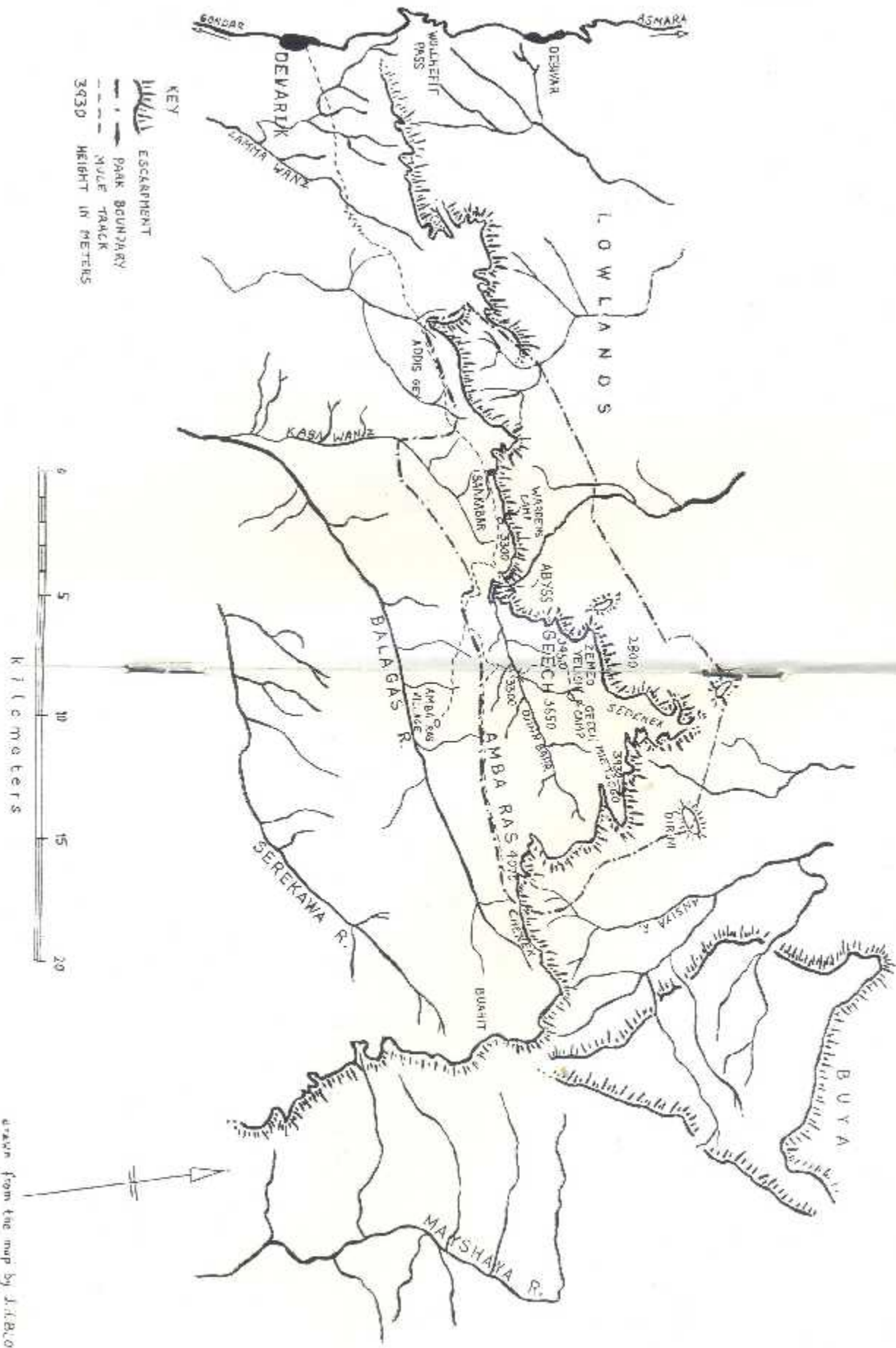
Cardboard book-cases obtained from the Peace Corps were quickly transformed into wall shelves for exhibiting preserved snakes, lizards, frogs, toads, centipedes, millipedes, scorpions and spiders. A dark recess of the Wildlife Department store yielded a tattered Hippo head which now enjoys considerable fame in its resurrected form at the Museum. Lurking just around the entry, the gigantic head startles many visitors into jumping back and asking unsurely, "Is it alive?"

The sole survivor of an early park map was posted with track descriptions and helpful information. Various pamphlets pertaining to wildlife were acquired for public dissemination through the help of Jill Poole at ETO. East African Airways presented the museum with a huge Cheetah photograph which now graces the gallery wall, and Svante Pohlstrand responded generously when his aid was solicited. Initially, he donated a fine mounted Waterbuck head for the museum and has since contributed excellent mounts of Porcupine, Warthog, Oryx, Lesser Kudu and several birds at a reduced fee, much to the enrichment of the museum.

Later, the Natural History Society offered to pay for something the museum needed which could not otherwise be acquired. We decided on a cabinet to house study skins of the park's birds. Plans were drawn up and submitted to a wood-works in Addis Ababa. The finished product became a valuable receptacle for study skins of some of the 400-odd bird species recorded for the Awash Park.

Also at this time, Dr I.L.Gibson who had made a prolonged study of the Park's Mt Fantallo, came to our

SIMIEN NATIONAL PARK



KEY

- ESCAPMENT
- PEAK BOUNDARY
- PAK TRACK
- 3930 HEIGHT IN METERS



drawn from the map by J.K. BLOWER

aid. He assembled samples of a dozen different rock specimens which comprise the park's foundations. This collection was supplemented by a description of each sample and an aerial photograph of Mt Fantalle, indicating formations that bear witness to its disruptive history.

More help was coming. Upon completion of his crocodile study in Ethiopia, Colin Chapman bequeathed to the Museum 12 newly hatched crocodiles. A special pond was built for them in front of the Museum and they have become a popular "live" exhibit. The Brooke Bond Tea Company donated its wall charts of African birds and mammals to further enhance the Museum's décor. The United States Information Service contributed 12 volumes of the LIFE "Nature" series as a reference set for the Museum.

While generous people were making these important contributions, I trained an Ethiopian assistant, Baleta Ayela, in the collection and preservation of specimens for display in the Museum. We were constantly on the look-out for road kills, train victims or any other animal remains as we found them. From a carcass the skin could be stripped (if a fresh kill), the skull salvaged (if not smashed) and the foot-prints recorded in plaster-of-paris. Most snakes in the collection were scrounged from Park trails where they had been flattened by vehicles. The Game Guards and labourers brought us animals they found on the roads or snakes they killed around (and sometimes in) their houses. We had a great time collecting frogs and toads during the rainy season when their incessant croaks and peeps would swell the night air. Insects, lizards, fish and small mammals were also actively pursued for the reference collection. Numerous birds and bats were mistnetted and their study-skins crafted by Beleta. Visiting biologists furnished the identification for many bats and reptiles and others were sent to the British Museum. We are ignorant

of much of the Park's small animal life just because it has not been thoroughly collected and much of that collected has not been identified.

After the Museum was well under way, one major threat invaded — termites! Consuming the eucalyptus up the insides of the mud walls, they attained the grass roof and there began a harvest that daily rains dust, trash, droppings and termites themselves on to everything below. This makes cleaning an endless task and will undoubtedly shorten the life of the mounted birds and mammals, all of which are completely exposed. Chances are that the building will survive this ravaging but future construction should ensure a concrete barrier at the base to prevent the entry of these voracious pests.

Despite its meagre beginnings, the Museum has proved to be very popular. The simple design and construction of the building using all local materials has been received by visitors as naturally attractive and appealing. The segmental booths provide maximum wall space for exhibits while the open centre adds spaciousness and provides ample room for movement and comfortable viewing. Light for the interior is admitted through the door and six windows — three of these are permanently fixed translucent plastic sheets to foil the prevailing winds; and in a situation where cost is a major obstacle, the building only consumed Eth.\$1,200. It required less than a month of labour and could last, termites willing, for 20 years.

The Museum is now cared for by Ato Wubishet. Baleta has recently been promoted to cashier at the Park, though he is eager to attend a techniques course offered at the Nairobi National Museum. I only hope that the Wildlife Department will promote his attendance there as soon as possible.

Such is the story of the Awash National Park Museum and Information Room. Built for a song, its exhibits

have swelled through the generosity and willingness to help shown by numerous interested people. Distinguished visitors such as Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands and Prince Philip of Great Britain have complimented this achievement. The BBC has filmed it for its forthcoming TV programme on the Awash National Park. A hodge-podge of materials widely solicited and gathered under one roof, its success can be attributed firstly to all contributing parties and secondly to the absence of another such Natural History Museum in the country which is open to the public.

(Editors note: Since this article was received in January 1970, the personnel attending the museum at Awash have changed and the termites seem to have been somewhat discouraged. The editor would also like to point out that the Natural History Museum of Haile Selassie I University is also available for viewing by the public if they contact the Biology Department for an appointment. Mr. Tony Hakensson and Dr. Largen have developed several show cases for public viewing showing the birds and mammals of Ethiopia. The official opening of the Natural History Museum awaits the completion of two of these show cases and an entrance lobby. Eth.\$ 10,000 are needed for this but the University funds are sorely pressed by the expanding student population.)

(A list of the materials available in the Museum at Awash can be obtained on request to the editor.)

CONSERVATION NOTES

by John Blower

Simien National Park

The long awaited declaration of a National Park in the Simien Mountains (Negarit Gazeta of 31st October 1969) has been one of the most encouraging developments of recent months. Apart from its unique ecological importance there is no doubt that Simien has very considerable potential as a recreational area, not only for economically important overseas tourists but also for future generations of Ethiopians themselves. At present this new Park can be reached only on foot or muleback from Devarik (see page 00) though plans are now afoot for construction of an access road which will open up this fascinating area to the less energetic and mobile visitor.

The recent report of an international team of professional consultants on tourist development who visited Simien was enthusiastic: "Here is scenery of world class, blessed with a perfect climate for walking and riding nine months of the year; offering an entirely different set of experiences to those the international tourist will have in the course of a tour of Africa and giving him a deep sense of achievement and satisfaction" Incidentally this team selected a magnificent hotel site perched on the very brink of the escarpment at an altitude of about 3,200 metres, giving a splendid Lammergeyer-eye view of some of the most incredible mountain scenery in the world.

Ethiopia has a hidden national treasure in Simien which could one day rank with the Grand Canyon and

become her best known tourist attraction. However, urgent action is needed to develop it as an effective Park in accordance with internationally accepted criteria, and to prevent the continuing destruction of habitat and illegal hunting of rare Walia Ibex by the local people. It is hoped that present plans to remove the people at present living within the Park and resettle them elsewhere will be implemented without delay, since this is essential both to the survival of the Walia Ibex and the future success of the National Park.

Bongo in Ethiopia?

The Bongo (*Boocercus eurycercus*) is a large and relatively rare antelope of the bushbuck family which is found in dense forest up to an altitude of about 3,000 metres, and has a somewhat disconnected distribution extending from Kenya (the Mau, Aberdares, Cherangani Mountains and Mount Kenya) through the southern Sudan to West Africa. In appearance it is like a very large bushbuck, standing 120-130 cms at the shoulder, bright chestnut red in colour, with a number of vertical white stripes on the flanks and white markings on the chest and face. It is one of the most beautiful and least known of the larger African antelope.

It has often been suggested that Bongo might occur in the dense and as yet little known montane forests of south-west Ethiopia, and at various times there have been reports of their having actually been seen; though so far no one seems either to have shot or photographed one, or to have produced any other conclusive proof of their existence. However, a recent letter from Father Marcos of Bonga Mission — whom one has no hesitation in accepting as a reliable witness — states categorically that in the dense Kaffa forest you will find the Menelik bushbuck, the (common) bushbuck and the "giant bushbuck", and goes on to say that he has seen

the latter several times. Could this "giant bushbuck" be the elusive bongo? It is certainly difficult to think of any other animal found in this particular type of habitat which might be described as a "giant bushbuck", as distinct from the common and Menelik bushbucks, and Father Marcos' interesting report therefore lends added credence to the possibility of Bongo occurring in Ethiopia.

N.B. The Editor would appreciate further evidence or comment on this subject.

Gemugofa Survey

Melvin Bolton, one of the Wildlife Conservation Department's two Biologists, recently carried out a preliminary survey of the southern and south western areas of Gemugofa province. He found that Neumann's Hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus neumanni*) was still fairly common in the Murle area (i.e. to the north-east of Lake Rudolf). Other species seen in the same region included Grevy's Zebra (very scarce), Grant's Gazelle, Oryx, Tiang, Gerenuk, greater and lesser Kudu, Warthog and Dikdik, with Buffalo, Waterbuck, Bushbuck, Leopard, Colobus and Brazza monkeys in the riverine forest along the Omo itself.

Mr Bolton also visited Lake Stephanie, where he found hundreds of thousands of lesser (and some greater) Flamingo. Game in the neighbourhood of the lake included Grant's Gazelle, Grevy's Zebra¹, Tiang, Oryx, Gerenuk, Dikdik and the Somali race of Ostrich. Mr Bolton reported that although the local tribesmen in the Stephanie area do not appear to molest the game

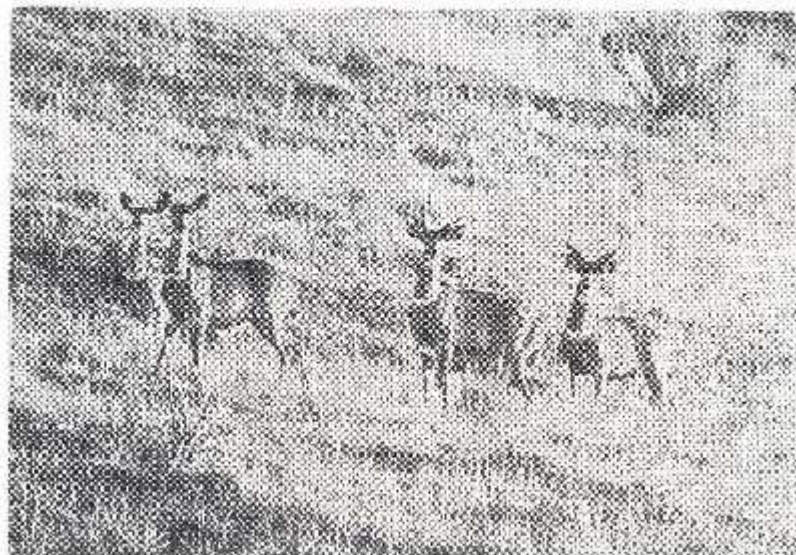
1. The alternating distribution of the two races of zebra in Ethiopia is interesting. From west to east: Burchell's occur on the west bank of the Omo; Grevy's on the east bank, extending as far as the Lake Stephanie area; then Burchell's again in the Rift Valley further north and east, and finally Grevy's in the Awash-Alladeghi Plains region.

the animals were shy and there was some evidence of their having been shot at from vehicles. He also reported that there was large scale poaching by the local people in the Murle area.

Bale Mountains

In September 1969 I had an interesting little safari in the Bale Mountains together with Curt Buer of the U.S. Peace Corps who was a Wildlife Biologist working with the department in this region. In the course of a 5-day trek with pack horses we climbed Batu (4,300 metres), which ranks as Ethiopia's second highest mountain and would be included within the proposed Bale Mountains National Park. Only four Mountain Nyala were actually seen during the entire trip, which was very disappointing. One could not avoid the suspicion that the scarcity of Nyala and the large numbers

Mountain Nyala, *Tragelaphus buxtoni*, on Gaysay mountain, Bale.
Photo by Robert G. WALTERMIRE.



of heavily armed militia to be seen in and around Dinshu village were not entirely disconnected.

There were, however, some compensations for the lack of Nyala such as the leopard we encountered in broad daylight and a howling gale within a few metres of the summit of Batu, apparently hunting klipspringer or hyrax, of both of which there was an abundance on the mountain. Bale is a delightful area of wild moorland and rocky peaks as yet relatively unspoilt by human influence, though the local practice of burning the giant heath (*Erica arborea*) every dry season is altering the whole ecology of the area and causing serious damage to the Nyala habitat — undoubtedly a major cause of their decline in numbers.

One of the many attractive features of these mountains are the little alpine lakes of which there are several on the high plateau at an altitude of 3,600 — 4,000 metres. In December, when I was again in Bale with Mr Buer, we discovered one such lake called Hora Bache near the head of the Fanu Valley, above Adaba, at a height of about 3,700 metres. Hora Bache is only a few acres in extent but is charmingly situated in a cup of the mountains, and is a splendid place for birds. In December we saw quite a large number of European Widgeon, also Pintail, Shoveller, Yellow-billed Duck, Little Grebe, and a few Blue-winged Geese. The lake is about 1-1½ days march from Adaba.

Mr Buer reported having seen a total of 31 Nyala during December in the upper Ueb Valley and the area of the Gaysay mountain, to the north of the Adaba-Dinshu road, also recording Bohor Reedbuck and Mene-lik Bushbuck in the same general area. There is little doubt that this interesting and scenically superb region would make a fine National Park, but — as in Simien — action is urgently needed to protect the wildlife against illegal hunting and the habitat against continued burning and other destructive practices.

(Editors note: Due to the vigilant supervision by the present U.S. Peace Corps Warden, Mr. Bob Waltermire, up to 30 Nyala can be seen regularly nearly any morning and evening in the forests on Gaysay mountain.)

Dahlac Islands

A survey of the Dahlac Islands in the Red Sea has just been completed by Dr. Carleton Ray, the well-known American marine biologist. This survey was generously financed by the African Wildlife Leadership Foundation of Washington D.C. and was undertaken in order to investigate the suitability of the area for a possible Marine National Park. Dr. Carleton Ray, together with Mr. Frank Minot, the AWLF representative in Nairobi, and Dr. T. Jefford of Haile Selassie I University spent eight days in the Islands based on a vessel specially chartered for the survey. Dr. Carleton Ray's final report has not yet been received, but he has provisionally recommended immediate protection of certain islands near the northern extremity of the Bure peninsular (south-east of Massawa). The islands concerned are Dissei, Sciumma, Assarca (two adjacent islets) and Ito Umm Namus. Protection would include all the surrounding reefs and marine life, and also all birds and other forms of wildlife on the islands concerned. Dr. Carleton Ray expressed particular concern for the survival of the Dugong and Green Turtle, both of which are regarded as endangered species and are known to occur in these waters. Dr. Ray has recommended that both these rare creatures should be completely protected, and that local fishermen should be prevented from killing them or taking turtle eggs.

Introduction of Trout

One thousand trout fingerlings (500 brown and 500 rainbow) were imported from Kenya in 1967 at the expense of the now apparently moribund Rod and Gun

Club, and by the joint efforts of the U.S. Air Force and the Wildlife Conservation Department were introduced into two rivers in the Bale Mountains. Though the outcome of this operation was for some time in doubt, it is pleasing to note that the trout now appear to be firmly established and that several of about 30-35 cms in length have recently been seen in each of the rivers. The exact location of the rivers concerned will not be divulged until successful breeding has been confirmed. Trout fishermen may, however, look forward with pleasurable anticipation to some enjoyable and rewarding visits to Bale within the next year or so.

(Editors note: It has now (1971) been confirmed that the Rainbow trout are breeding successfully and other rivers in the Bale mountains have been stocked with trout fingerlings. There is now an active fishing club in the Bale mountains. The membership is Eth.\$ 50:00 per year or a daily license of Eth.\$ 10:00 can be bought at the Park Headquarters or through the Wildlife Conservation Department. However, the Brown trout do not seem to be breeding yet — perhaps due to the lack of the right kind of gravel beds in the river Ueb).

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**APPLICATIONS SHOULD BE SENT TO THE HON. SECRETARY,
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A CHECKLIST OF THE BIRDS OF ETHIOPIA

Emil K. Urban
and
Leslie H. Brown

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