

The Hippos of Lake Baringo

By ARMAND DENIS

This story, quoted by kind permission from Armand Denis's autobiography "On Safari", published by Collins and reviewed on page 262, is a neat illustration of some of the problems of conservation.

BARINGO is a small lake by African standards. About twenty-five miles long, it lies to the north of Nakuru in particularly wild country. Unlike Nakuru, Elmenteita, Hannington and Magadi, the big salt-lakes of the Great Rift Valley, Lake Baringo has fresh water. In this respect, it is like Lake Naivasha and, like Naivasha, it used to support a large and flourishing population of hippo. After the war these hippo and the rest of the game that used to surround the two lakes began to be seriously threatened by indiscriminate shooting and spearing. By the time the hippo were declared Royal Game five years ago, the hippo of both Baringo and Naivasha had been brought close to extinction.

In the whole of Lake Baringo, there could scarcely have been more than a hundred hippo left; and about this time another danger came to threaten this pitiful remnant. For several seasons drought or scanty rainfall brought disaster to the surrounding area which had already been ravaged by overgrazing and injudicious burning of grass and bush. Two years ago the hippos had to live through a period of several months of virtual starvation, and last year conditions were even worse. Soon the hippos were so weak that they could scarcely stagger a few hundred yards from their lake, and within that limited radius they would wander searching for the dry seed pods that fell from the thorn trees and that were all that was left to give them the illusion of food.

Michaela and I heard about the plight of the hippos when we were staying with our friend, David Roberts, who has the fishing concession of Lake Baringo, and lives there with his family on the western shore. He had been particularly affected by the plight of eight hippos that had lived for a long time on the edge of the lake within sight of his house.

As the weeks passed without sign of rain, these eight hippos had become weaker and weaker. At night they used to wander through the remains of his parched-up garden in search of food and soon they became so thin that their ribs showed and they staggered as they walked. Instead of disappearing out of sight in the Lake during the day, as these animals usually do, they would simply lie exhausted on the bank, a sitting target for any African hunter who cared to take them. Finally, when David found the bull of this small herd actually in the porch of his house, sniffing at the remains of the food he had left out for the dog, he decided that the time had come to make some attempt to save these eight hippos.

Hay was the only food that he could get for them in sufficient quantities and this he put out. To start with the hippos were clearly puzzled by the new food. The first night they nuzzled it and scattered most of it along the shore. But they ate a little and, within a few days, they were eating three to four full bales a night. The hippos began to put on weight again, and although they still looked emaciated, they clearly had a chance of surviving until the rains came. Their favourite food of all was fine lucerne hay, with star grass hay and oat hay running it a close second. At first they would also accept Rhodes grass hay and ordinary wheat straw, but then they became fussier about the food they would take and tended to leave this uneaten. As a result, David was having to spend more than he could afford on good

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quality hay to keep the eight hippos alive, and Michaela and I offered to help by starting a small fund for the hippos of Lake Baringo. The Wild Life Society headed the subscription list with a gift of £50 and although we received contributions from as far afield as the United States, most of the money came from conservationists we knew in Kenya. Within a few weeks we had enough to guarantee the hippo's food for as long as the drought lasted.

Soon we saw a remarkable difference in the habits of the hippos. They began to develop confidence in people. Normally, hippos spend most of the day well off shore and land only at night, but these soon started lying in the shallow water during the day, not more than twenty or thirty yards from the men loading the fish into David's freezing plant. In the evening they would come out of the water, start eating long before dark, and stay out until day-break. One evening I actually saw David pat one of the hippos on the back as it waddled past on the way to the house for the day's ration. All this was very satisfactory except for one thing that began to worry David as the drought went on.

He knew the Africans well who lived around the lake and he understood how the drought was hitting them. They were beginning to go hungry too, and he knew that the longer the drought lasted the more of a temptation these nearly tamed hippos would become. He knew just how serious this danger was when he saw one of the hippos with a spear sticking out of its back. It was not a bad wound and David was able to get the spear out. But the day came when David had to leave home for a week. When he returned he found that the big old bull had been speared to death in his absence. A few weeks later, another followed. Then a female was killed and her baby caught in the mud and choked to death. Within a matter of weeks, the last of the eight hippos we thought we had saved had been killed, and the animals exterminated from one more African lake. Ultimately several of the Africans responsible for the killings were arrested and imprisoned for a while, but the sentence struck me as being almost as pointless as it was unfair.

Bird Sanctuary in India

THE Wildlife Reserve, created out of the Maharajah of Bharatpur's former hunting park, 90 km. from Delhi, is described by an FPS member, the Rev. Dr. A. C. Bouquet, who visited it in February, as "one of the best water-bird sanctuaries in the world. We saw a hundred Siberian cranes, about 200 white pelicans from central Asia, several hundred painted storks and their nests, adjutants and other varieties of stork, black, purple, and white ibis, spoonbills, stilts, avocets, egrets, at least five varieties of heron, a magnificent flight of a dozen sarus cranes, demoiselle cranes, hundreds of duck of many species, and many small waders. . . . The bird life of the jungle is also profuse, with large flocks of the commoner Indian birds such as green pigeons, rose-ringed parakeets, and bee-eaters, and less common species." The reserve is controlled by the Forestry Department in conjunction with the Bombay Natural History Society, with a warden in charge, and the royal hunting-lodge has been converted into a guest house.

APES and Monkeys, by Desmond Morris (Bodley Head, 13s. 6d.), is a straightforward, factual and attractively produced children's book with a remarkable amount of information and no trace of condescension in its thirty pages, about half of which are taken up with Barry Driscoll's splendidly lifelike drawings. The finger tapping of the aye-aye, why monkeys make faces, and the intelligence of chimpanzees are subjects to fascinate any child.