

BEAUTY AND FANTASY IN NAIROBI PARK

By ROBIN TOMKINSON

If you have never seen the African animals except in zoos, and have always longed to see them wild, the Nairobi National Park is a sort of paradise. At first it is hard to believe that you are not in the middle of a wonderful dream, though as with many such dreams, there is grimness lurking in the background in the form of Vultures, Hyænas, and, of course, Lions.

Though the Park is quite small, only about 40 square miles, the number and variety of animals is amazing, especially considering that during the war it was an army training ground, so hardly a peaceful place for them. But now, driving slowly along, you find hundreds of beautiful and fantastic beasts strolling unconcernedly around you, for they have found that they are safe from men in cars, if not from Lions.

The country is fairly flat, so from the entrance to the Park there is a very good view and it is thrilling to see the game in large and small herds scattered all over the plains, and then to look through field-glasses and discover that among them are Giraffe, Zebra, Wildebeest, Impala, and all sorts of other exciting animals. When the car comes towards them they do not stampede as one might expect of such wild things, but simply get out of the way if they happen to be on the track or very near it. (The old Wildebeest seem to like lying down in the fairway, and take a very low view of being disturbed !)

Even sitting in the car (which you may not leave), you can really appreciate the many different ways in which these animals are beautiful and interesting, and especially the charms of the antelope-gazelle family, who, as a rule, are so very nervous and wild. There is the incredible grace of their movements, which you cannot realize unless they are free, then the exquisite detail of their heads, ears, eyes, and horns, and also the lovely colour and texture of their coats. It is fascinating to watch the different kinds of movement. The gazelles are so light and airy that one can easily imagine them dancing to a rondo by Mozart. I saw two Grant's Gazelles playing, almost dancing ; they began by tearing round and round in circles then, as they grew still more intoxicated with their own movement they jumped into the air again and again, about 4 feet clear of the ground, and this was simply *joie de vivre* as they were obviously not afraid.

Not all the animals are beautiful, but the infinite variety is so interesting—" why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should be prized ? " For instance the variations on the antelope-

gazelle theme are fascinating; beginning with Thomson's Gazelle (Tommies), all fire and air and lightness and grace, and ending with the Wildebeest who looks like a nightmare. Between such extremes are Grant's Gazelle, taller and less elf-like than the Tommies, but the height of elegance, with most lovely horns and long pointed ears, exquisitely shaped. They know quite well that their appearance is beyond criticism.

Under the green fever trees by the Athi River are herds of Impala, a lovely bright chestnut on their necks and backs, paler on the flanks and white underneath. Their big ears are lined with white and tipped with black velvet, and above their hind fetlocks are little black tufts which look like anklets. The old rams have magnificent horns with very beautiful and complicated curves. Alas I did not see their wonderful jumping, when they become almost airborne.

The Waterbuck are different from most other antelopes, as their coats, instead of being smooth and shiny, are rather like a pony's in the winter, and the hair on their necks is quite thick and long. They too are beautifully "finished", their fluffy rounded ears have black tips and white linings, and there is some reddish-brown at the base of their horns. We had a perfect view of one with a very fine head, standing half-hidden in the long dead grass about thirty yards from the track. We stopped the car and he stood absolutely still for about five minutes considering us. His head carriage and the curve of his horns were superb.

Two good examples of the not-so-beautiful of the antelope kind are the Wildebeest and the Kongani (or "Konk"). The Wildebeest, though a bit nightmarish, are quite decorative and look rather heraldic especially when they gambol and prance for no apparent reason; they often go about with zebras, who in their striped way are almost equally fantastic. But the poor old konks are just plain ugly. They look as though they had tried to be picturesquely ugly like a Wildebeest, failed dismally, and then made a despairing effort to turn into an elegant sort of antelope—failed again and ended by looking like nothing on earth! To make things worse they seem rather apologetic about it all, and even the babies look solemn and elderly.

Although they are so fantastic the Giraffes are some of the most decorative of all, and in the Park you can see them perfectly and appreciate their wonderfully graceful way of coping with such unorthodox necks and legs. They are sometimes called ungainly and from their extraordinary shape one would almost expect them to be, but when they have plenty of room to

manœuvre they are a delight to watch ; they move as though every joint was perfectly oiled and glide along like a slow-motion film. When you see a procession of about ten of them walking in single file, with the black ends of their tails streaming in the wind, they look superb, and you realize what much longer tails they have than you had imagined. Sometimes one of the Nairobi Giraffes will stand about 30 yards from the car, watching you, so that you can see the lovely detail of his head and his great dark brown eyes, with lashes longer than any film star's. The general effect of a Giraffe's head with the curved and pointed ears, the spots and the delicate lines is somehow rather like an exotic orchid.

These are just some impressions of a rather ignorant enthusiast, and I have mentioned only a few of the animals, and none of the birds, which are also fascinating. But after seeing so many lovely things one felt more than ever how much national parks like the one at Nairobi are needed. Without such sanctuaries it would be only a matter of time before all or most of the game disappeared, as indeed it has in most areas which are not national parks or game reserves. This was very much impressed on me during two months' stay in Kenya and Uganda, in the course of which we travelled some 1,500 miles. Most of the Nairobi Park animals drifted in from the adjoining Masai Reserve, which is one of the few remaining places in Kenya which are still well stocked with game. They come and go as they like between the Park and the Reserve.

The game wardens, mostly behind the scenes, must be doing a very fine job, which benefits not only the animals but the people who come to see and enjoy them. One can only hope they will get every encouragement to carry on the good work, so that there may still be some places where Gazelle, Impala, Giraffe, and Zebra and many others can continue to live and move, because they are really some of the loveliest things in this world—where loveliness grows rarer.
