

‘Anticipations of Sport’

The impact of the Zulu campaign on the natural world

By Ian Knight

In the 1930s, looking back wistfully over a life rich in adventure, George Mossop - who would serve in Zululand as a teenage trooper in the Frontier Light Horse, and leave an extraordinary account of his participation in the battles of Hlobane and Khambula - recalled a brief spell spent in 1876 in the company of professional hunters in the Transvaal. There was then, he said,

... game, game everywhere, as far as the eye could see - all on the move, grazing. The game did not appear to be moving; the impression that I received was that the earth was doing so, carrying the game with it - they were in such vast numbers, moving slowly and steadily, their heads all in one direction.

Yet that extraordinary sight - and ‘no one who has not witnessed such a scene can form any idea of what it was like’ - was even then in the passing. After millennia of living to their optimum population levels in the rich South African environment, only marginally affected by the limited hunting activities of black Africans, the game was already, by 1876, in the process of being devastated by the arrival of European hunters armed with efficient firearms. Mossop himself knew it, and came to regret it;

On our old hunting-ground I do not think that a dozen head of game could be found to-day; certainly not one black wildebeest ... The old man Visajie told me he seriously began shooting when he was a lad of ten years of age. He said that in the Orange Free State the game had so diminished [by 1876] that it no longer paid to shoot there; that the game were at their last gasp, and were making their final stand in that section of the eastern Transvaal in which our camp was situated. Here they were in their hundreds of thousands, and if this was their last gasp and last stand it makes one wonder what the country looked like when they were at full strength.¹

A similar process had already occurred in Zululand. The environment is different there, of course, and the country never supported the huge quantities of savannah animals that thrived in the open grassland of the interior; indeed, historically the human population was also always more dense. Nevertheless, Zululand boasted an ancient and rich fauna which, similarly, was already under pressure from European hunting techniques by the 1870s. The Zulus themselves were efficient hunters, but usually on a limited scale; only those hunts organised by the Zulu kings and involving the participation of hundreds - even thousands - of men made any significant impression on wildlife population levels. In the 1820s, for example, King Shaka had organised a large-scale hunt as part of the cleansing ceremonies following the death of his mother; several *amabutho* took part, driving game *en masse* towards the confluence of the Black and White Mfolozi Rivers where animals were trapped in prepared pits and killed. Perhaps the greatest impact caused by the Zulus themselves was on those smaller species of animals whose pelts were desirable as part of the ceremonial regalia of the *amabutho*, in particular spotted cats such as the genet or serval (only men of rank were entitled to wear leopardskin; if a leopard was killed by a commoner, he was required to present the pelt to his *inkosi*).

It was, however, the arrival of the whites (from 1824) which precipitated the reduction

¹ *Running the Gauntlet* by George Mossop, London, 1937.

of Zulu game. Almost from the first, white settlers augmented their trading activities with commercial hunting - there was a growing international market for ivory and skins. The Zulus had only rarely hunted elephants prior to this, and had no tradition of making ivory ornaments and bangles; realising that the whites would pay handsomely for tusks they soon collaborated in the trade, however. With the expansion of settlement in Natal in the 1840s, commercial hunting in Zululand increased. White hunters were required to obtain permission from the Zulu kings, and certain areas were considered out of bounds as being royal hunting grounds; nevertheless, the activities of well-organised hunting parties caused widespread destruction among natural populations of elephants, hippos, buffalo and those antelope whose skins or horns were considered desirable. Even by the 1870s the number of white hunters operating in Zululand had begun to decline because animals were no longer as plentiful as they once were.

By the time of the Anglo-Zulu War, although small groups of animals still survived across the country, the larger concentrations had retreated to areas less accessible to man, in particular the wild country along the Black Mfolozi and the flats of Maputaland ('Thongaland') beyond the barrier of the Lebombo mountains. Furthermore, the movement of large armies of men, whether white or black, further reduced the chances of encounters with wildlife.

Nevertheless, the possibility of discovering game was greatly anticipated by the troops, British in particular. Most of the regular officers had come from backgrounds where field sports - hunting, shooting, fishing, steeple-chasing - were popular pastimes, and many of them looked forward to the opportunity to enjoy some sport at the expense of African wildlife. There was a more prosaic reason, too; game meat offered a desirable alternative to the monotony of daily rations. Ordinary soldiers were not, of course, permitted to waste ammunition in hunting but officers were able to indulge their interests, and indeed some had brought their personal hunting weapons on campaign with them. Members of the Irregular and Volunteer corps generally enjoyed more freedom in this regard too. Captain W.E. Montague of the 94th recalled the enthusiasm which greeted one encounter;

... a troop of hartebeests showed about a mile away, and a couple of sportsmen started at once in pursuit. The ground was favourable; and the column having halted for the mid-day meal, was able to watch the whole of the chase. Presently the horsemen dismounted for a shot, and the excitement vented itself in loud cries and directions from the men.

'Keep your head down, captain darlin'!

'Don't you see that big one with the two horns; he's a cow, he is, not a deer at all, at all'.

'Holy mother, but them's the pretty creatures to shoot!'

Just then, puff went the smoke of the two rifles, and off galloped the hartebeests untouched ...

Equally typical was another incident, also related by Montague;

Far out on this sea of grass we had been watching a speck moving constantly, which might be a horse, an ox, or some wild animal. The glasses made it out to be like an ox; to imaginations fired with accounts of South African sport, it was a wild buffalo. So a sportsman was soon in the saddle, and rode off with a rifle to solve the question. His progress was eagerly watched: the leaving the pony in a hollow, which instantly galloped home - the stalk, and the final shot, when the great beast fell over heavily, - were all intensely interesting. Our anticipations of sport were, however, rudely shattered when the sportsman returned with the news that he had only shot a tame ox, wandering about ownerless on the veldt ...²

² *Campaigning in South Africa*, by Captain W.E. Montague, London,

Major Anstruther, also of the 94th, certainly took the opportunity to shoot whenever he could. 'I go out every day shooting', he wrote in letters home,

but there is lamentably little. On Monday I got a wild duck and on Tuesday I made a great bag, 2 wild turkeys (small ones) 2 plover and 2 brace of quail - did not miss a shot. The turkeys and wild duck were awfully good eating but I have given up shooting quail as cartridges are scarce and you can't buy them.

A month after Ulundi, he noted

Brook and I have been out shooting all morning and we saw hartebeest and some bush buck but I did not have a shot.³

For the most part, however, the presence of so much concentrated humanity was enough to make the game scarce. According to Dr Doyle Glanville, who served with the Flying Column,

Marching along these solitary wastes but few signs of life are visible - not even a bird, save now and then when we kill oxen, and the vultures mysteriously appear. Occasionally we come across the track of some startled hare, or perhaps a buck, when the excitement is for the moment tremendous ... [Yesterday] a buck sprang up and ran through the column. In an instant a lot of soldiers and natives went pell-mell after it, many coming to grief, and sprawling over the ant-bear holes that abound in the long grass. The numbers were too much for it, the game was duly bagged, and the happy hunters were rewarded at their dinner by a change from the usual fare ...⁴

When, after the relief of Eshowe, Lord Chelmsford personally led a foray to destroy eZulwini, the personal homestead of Prince Dabulamanzi kaMpande, the troops disturbed a small antelope on the return trip. Guy Dawnay, a gentleman adventurer who had attached himself to the NNC, was sorely tempted by the sport;

... on the way I nearly got a good shot at a duiker not eighty yards off, bounding along; Dunn just missed it, but I couldn't fire, as it was on the ridge over which the General had disappeared.⁵

The sort of bigger game to engage the true sportsman's instincts of course kept well away from the progress of the armies. Lieutenant Baskerville Mynors of the 3/60th, who had come out with the reinforcements after iSandlwana and had fought at kwaGingindlovu, dreamed of bagging a serious trophy even as he lay in his sickbed after the battle, suffering the first pangs of the dysentery which would soon kill him;

Two rhinoceroses have been seen near here feeding, I wish I could get a shot at them, but can't get leave to go out.⁶

It was during the pursuit of King Cetshwayo during August 1879 that British patrols

³ Letters of Major Philip Anstruther, National Army Museum London, reproduced in *War and Peace in South Africa 1879-1881*, edited by Dr Paul Butterfield, Johannesburg 1987.

⁴ Report in *The Graphic* 30 August 1879.

⁵ *Campaigns, Zulu 1879, Egypt 1882, Suakin 1885*, by G.C. Dawnay, privately printed c. 1886, reprinted 1989.

⁶ *Letters and Diary of Lt. A.C.B. Mynors*, privately published 1879.

encountered the most game. The king had retired north of the Black Mfolozi river, and troops pursuing him moved through less densely populated country - once regarded as Shaka's personal hunting ground, and in modern times incorporated into the Umfolozi Game Reserve - which was thick with bush, and where wildlife still teemed. One night, when Captain Lord Gifford's patrol was camped near a Zulu homestead, an ox from the settlement was taken by a lion, while

several kinds of antelope of the larger sort, waterbucks, and hartebeests appeared, and as the troopers managed to wound and ride down several, their nightly bivouac in the forest was solaced by a feast of excellent venison.⁷

Perhaps the most poignant encounter with wildlife occurred on 4th July. Lord Chelmsford's troops had just finished manoeuvring their square within sight of the royal homestead at oNdini, and the first Zulu *amabutho* were beginning to advance towards them across the plain, when a duiker, a small grey antelope, disturbed by all the movement in the grass, broke cover and dashed off down one face of the square. In the tension of the moment the troops broke into a cheer. It was a fitting tribute to two very different aspects of a timeless Africa, both of which were in the process of being irrevocably destroyed.

Editor's footnote.

The new forthcoming Charles Harford book relates numerous examples of game hunting in great detail across what is today KwaZulu Natal and confirms Ian Knight's above article. Harford's book was not available to Ian when he wrote the article.

⁷ *The Story of the Zulu Campaign* by Major Ashe and Captain E.V. Wyatt-Edgell, London, 1880.