

The Last Nakuru Hartebeest

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The Nakuru hartebeest is virtually extinct. Only one male survives thanks to thoughtless slaughter. This article consists of extracts from a report to the Kenya Game Department by the author, then at University College, Nairobi, ending with a note by him on the scientific reason for conserving subspecies such as this hartebeest.

Until the last war the Nakuru hartebeest was extremely numerous. It certainly existed in thousands in its former range, the Rift Valley in Kenya, shown in Stewart and Stewart, 1963. It was rapidly decimated by shooting to feed farm labourers and, during the war, to feed prisoners of war, when it was also reported that herds were machine-gunned by troops based near Nakuru. This, together with continuous poaching, resulted in a rapid reduction in numbers. By 1951 there were not more than 20 (Sidney, 1965); by 1963 under 10 (Stewart and Stewart, 1963). A herd of about 6 were to be seen on the western slopes of the Menengai Crater until a few years ago, but have since been eliminated. Another small group in the area of Ngata Farm near Nakuru was reduced, about March 1967, to one male, one female and one juvenile; in April the female and the juvenile were killed. The male moved to Bridge Farm where it is protected by the owner Mr. T. C. Murton. A herd of hartebeest near Molo, which was wrongly reported as being of the *nakurae* type proved to be similar to the *jacksoni* found near Soy.

The Taxonomic Position

The Nakuru hartebeest was first reported by Heller (1912). He named it *Bubalis* (= *Alcelaphus*) *nakurae*, and separated it from Neumann's hartebeest *B. neumanni* with which it had hitherto been confused. Lydekker (1914), however, regarded it as only a race of Coke's hartebeest *A. buselaphus cokei*. In 1929 Ruxton and Schwarz examined the British Museum skull collection of the genus *Alcelaphus* obtained from the neighbourhood of the East African Rift Valley and were struck by the great individual variation "which embraced every stage from true *jacksoni* (Jackson's hartebeest) to typical *cokei* (Coke's hartebeest)". On the basis of various cranial measurements they concluded that all the hartebeest from the Rift Valley were hybrids between *A. b. jacksoni* and *A. b. cokei*.

In general the taxonomy of the genus *Alcelaphus* is confused, and the suggestion by Ruxton and Schwartz (1929) that the numerous subspecies should be grouped into three species is at best an interim measure. Clearly the genus is in need of complete taxonomic revision which should be based on a modern survey of all members. At present it can only be said that there appears to be a cline extending through *A. b. major* in West Africa, *A. b. lekwel* in Central Africa and Uganda, to *A. b. cokei* in Kenya and Tanzania. The Nakuru hartebeest ("*nakurae*") and the Kenya hartebeest ("*keniae*") lie between the last two.

In any taxonomic assessment it is desirable to make comparisons from as many disciplines as possible. The presence of living animals means

that comparative studies can be done of, for example, behaviour, in addition to those of osteology and related disciplines. The value of comparative behaviour as a tool of taxonomy has been demonstrated by the research of Lorenz *et al* on the Anatidae and by Tinbergen *et al* on the Laridae. The genus *Alcelaphus* is one of the few bovid genera with sufficient living members and sufficient taxonomic diversity to allow comparative studies within one genus. As groups such as the *nakuræ* type are eliminated such research will lose much of its value.

The surviving male *nakuræ* most resembles the specimen B. M. 4.11.5.32 in the British Museum collection. This specimen (which is figured in Ruxton and Schwartz, 1929) and the living male are quite unlike living *jacksoni* and *cokei* in horn shape, and also unlike skulls of the *kenia* type which I have seen. A population of the *nakuræ* type would have been invaluable in taxonomic and evolutionary studies of the genus *Alcelaphus*.

The importance of this extinction is not that one intergrade population has been exterminated but that a representative of a cline of hartebeest from the Western hartebeest in West Africa to Coke's in East Africa is now missing. The lesson to be learned is that other members of the cline are equally vulnerable and will disappear in the near future if nothing is done to protect them. A similar situation could arise with the Kenya hartebeest.

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Literature

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Not Extinct After All

A bird believed to be extinct in Australia has been rediscovered by a British Museum expedition, which found the first specimen of the black grass-wren *Amytornis housei* to be seen since its discovery in 1901.