

Airlift for Hunter's Antelope: Rescue Operation in Kenya

By Major Ian Grimwood

THE hirola or Hunter's antelope *Damaliscus hunteri*, is one of those animals which are in danger, not because their numbers are being reduced, but because no area has been set aside specifically for their preservation, and their natural range is so small that any change in land use within it could result in their extermination. Such a threat occurred in 1962. In November of that year, it was announced that the United Nations Special Fund was to finance a £500,000 survey in the lower Tana River region with a view to selecting large areas of land suitable for intensive settlement under irrigation. The area to be surveyed on the left bank of the river almost exactly coincided with the range of Hunter's antelope, and moreover the scheme included no provision for studying the effects of the irrigation project on the wild life of the area.*

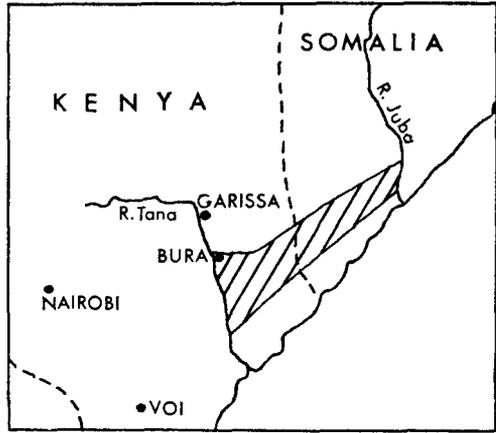
Hunter's antelope occurs only in a narrow strip of country where coastal forest gives way to the thorn bush sub-desert of the hinterland, from the Tana River in the south up to, originally, the Juba River in the north. In the Somali Republic it has now disappeared from the northern part of its range, according to the latest information from Mr. Philip K. Crowe, in correspondence following his World Wildlife Fund mission in 1963. In the southern part it is still fairly common, though the total population is estimated to be no more than 200. On the Kenya side it has if anything increased in recent years, and the population is now as high as scanty records show it ever to have been. It is not subject to serious poaching and the pastoral use of the land is not so intense as to conflict with its needs in any way. Unfortunately, despite the recommendations of various game policy committees, it has not been possible to set aside a national park or game reserve within that area. The Kenya population was until recently thought to number about 350, but this is now considered to be an underestimate. It is safe to say, however, that the overall population in both Somalia and Kenya is unlikely to exceed 1,500.

The usual description of the animal as looking like a kongoni with the horns of an impala is as good a one as any. It has the soft silky skin of a topi but of kongoni coloration, prominent sub-orbital glands and a white lance-corporal's chevron on the face above the eyes. How such a distinct member of the *Damaliscus* group (Heller gave it a genus to itself) came to evolve in such complete isolation poses problems of the greatest scientific

* This project came under heavy criticism at last year's IUCN General Assembly in Nairobi on the grounds that the Food and Agriculture Organisation, which is to supervise the survey, and the Kenya Government, had ignored the obligation arising from a series of international conferences held over the past eight years to include an ecological survey in the early planning stages of any major hydrological or irrigation scheme.

interest. (Photographs taken during the capture operations by Des Bartlett are on Plates 3 and 4, following page 172.)

In face of the threat to its habitat, and since no outside help was forthcoming, the Kenya Game Department biologist, A. D. Graham, was put on to a study of the general biology and ecological requirements of the species; also to determine the minimum area of its natural range that would need to be set aside to ensure its survival, and to survey existing national parks and game reserves to



A sketch map of the Kenya-Somali border. The shaded area represents the former territory of Hunter's antelope.

discover if any could offer a suitable habitat if, as a last resort, a transfer of population became necessary. It was originally thought that Graham would have three years (the time scheduled for the irrigation survey) in which to complete these studies, but within a few months disturbances resulting from Somali secession demands began to interfere with free movement in the area. In the meantime, an anonymous donor, through the U.S. National Appeal of the World Wildlife Fund, had offered money to cover the capture and removal of a breeding nucleus to a place of safety. So, as Graham had already obtained a fair knowledge of the animal's food requirements, his efforts were now concentrated on finding such a place.

The most likely area he found was a large plain some eight miles south-east of Voi, in the Tsavo Royal National Park, where grew most of the grasses on which these antelope had been observed to feed. With the agreement of the Trustees it was therefore decided that, irrespective of what could be done to conserve the species within its natural range, a breeding population would be transferred to the Tsavo Park as a joint Game Department-National Parks enterprise.

The Game Warden at Garissa, D. H. McCabe, G.M., was put in charge of the capture operations, and as the best time for release would be the onset of the rains in October, he began his preparations in August. The East African Wild Life Society Capture Team, under A. V. McGuire and financed by the Elsa Trust, was posted to assist, and Graham joined the party. The first difficulty was that new security regulations prohibited camping on the left bank of the Tana, and freshly caught animals could obviously not be transported all the way to the bridges at either Garissa or Garsen. This was solved by the Royal Engineers, under Major Bull of the 34 Independent Field Squadron, who constructed and installed at Bura a pontoon made of petrol drums, generously donated by the Caltex Oil Co.

This was capable of carrying a long-wheel-base landrover, and meant that animals caught on the Walu Plains (the main concentration area) could be transported to holding pens on the right bank in a journey of only fifty miles. Meanwhile McCabe had cut the necessary approaches to the pontoon site on both banks, set up camp, built holding pens on the right bank, constructed an airstrip and, with the assistance of the Regional Government Agent at Garissa, graded all roads over which the animals would have to be transported. Similar preparations were carried out by the Warden of the Tsavo East Royal National Park, D. L. W. Sheldrick, at the reception end. Catching started early in September, using the Wild Life Society capture car which had originally been built for use in Arabia on the Fauna Preservation Society's "Operation Oryx".

A Short Straight Chase

With an unknown animal it was feared that capture might present new difficulties, but it turned out that Hunter's antelope is neither as fast nor as determined as its relations the topi and hartebeest, and that it could, in fact, be overtaken and noosed after a remarkably short, straight chase. Once caught, however, it proved docile but highly strung, requiring careful handling, and the first two animals, which were adults, both died. After that only young animals were captured, of from nine to twelve months old, and there were no more casualties.

The original plan had been to build up stocks at Bura, holding the animals in the pens there for two or three weeks until they had become thoroughly acclimatised to their new conditions, and then to run them over to their destination by lorry six at a time in separate crates. On arrival in the Tsavo they were again to be held for a period so that they could develop a herd sense and a sense of territory, and thus avoid the immediate scattering as individuals which had occurred with other animals. Unfortunately, though they fed readily and quickly lost all wildness, they did not do well in the pens and several apparently perfectly fit animals died from what was thought must be some endemic disease or dietary deficiency, for post mortems yielded no positive clue.

Disease Easily Cured

Recently, however, Dr. Jarrett, of the Veterinary Faculty of the Royal College, Nairobi, has found that the deaths were due to muscular dystrophy, a deficiency disease contracted in the wild and well known in domestic animals, but not previously recorded in wild animals. It is a great pity that the diagnosis was too late to help, as the condition is easily cured by injections.

A lorry load and a plane load sent off immediately proved no more successful, and the operation appeared to be up against an insuperable difficulty. It was provisionally solved by the arrival in Mombasa of the British aircraft-carrier H.M.S. *Ark Royal*. When Captain M. P. Pollock, M.V.O., D.S.C., learned of the problem, he immediately offered the use of the carrier's helicopters.

Ground parties with communications and fuel tankers were sent straight-way to Bura, and to the landing strip which Sheldrick prepared alongside

the holding pens at the Tsavo end. Within forty-eight hours three helicopters of 851 Naval Air Squadron, under Lieut.-Commander J. R. T. Bluett, had delivered the twenty remaining Hunter's Antelope travelling in cut-down crates which eliminated the need for heavy drugging. They arrived in the pink of condition, having spent only an hour and three-quarters in the air and less than two and a half hours in a crate, and were quite unaffected by the journey. More could have been transported but for the final collapse of the catching car and all substitutes, which put an end to further capture attempts.

The Herd Released

Three days later the rain came and with it a flush of new grass. In view of past difficulties of keeping the animals alive and well in confinement, Sheldrick opened the gates of the pens, and on the 28th October the whole herd moved quietly out and dispersed in small groups across the plain. The move had been completed in the nick of time. For, as a result of raids from Somalia, the whole of the Kenya range of the antelope has since been closed to movement on security grounds.

Whether this nucleus of thirty young animals will be able to establish itself in the Park remains to be seen ; for it can be argued that, if the region to the south of the Tana meets the exact requirements of the species, it would have spread there already, since the river has proved no barrier to topi and certain other species.

That they have a chance of establishing themselves at all, however, is due to the kindness of the Royal Navy and the Royal Engineers, without whose help the move would not have been possible. Thanks or credit are also due to the anonymous donor of funds, to P. K. D. Stewart, the professional trapper who assisted in capture operations for a period with his own transport and equipment, to the East African Wild Life Society Capture Team, and to many other advisers and helpers, as well as to the Wardens and other staff of the Royal National Parks and the Game Department who were engaged in the operation.

This article is reprinted in the main from *Africana* by kind permission of the Editor.

African Wildlife Portrayed

Nothing is more photogenic than African wildlife, and it is as a magnificent picture book that C. W. A. Guggisberg's *THE WILDERNESS IS FREE* (Bailey Bros. and Swinfen, 42s.) will be most enjoyed. Part of the proceeds will go to the World Wildlife Fund. The larger animals predominate—lions, rhinos, cheetahs (some of the best photographs), giraffes, crocodiles, antelopes—but there are also some of the less commonly seen, such as the aardvark, the bat-eared fox, and the toothless pangolin, the latter in a highly improbable-looking pose walking head first down a bare tree trunk. The text, brief, informative, and descriptive, is written by one who has spent twenty-five years in Africa.