

HERONS OF RONDEVLEI

Near the southernmost tip of Africa, within fourteen miles of Capetown, there was opened in 1952 the Rondevlei bird sanctuary. It is only a mile long and a third of a mile wide, small indeed compared with the great game reserves with which Africa is often associated. Yet it has value altogether out of proportion to its size.

The district was urban, the bush around the sanctuary contained the scattered shacks of an African and Coloured community, to which people, in the words of Mr. Ernest Middlemiss the warden, "the concept of nature protection was inexpressibly alien and probably incomprehensible." The pool itself—Rondevlei means round lake—had been used for swimming; wood had been cut; flowers had been picked; nest-robbing and bird-trapping had been prevalent; altogether not a very promising outlook for bird preservation. Yet for three and a half years good relationship with the local people has been maintained and there has been no important violation of the sanctuary, surely a good augury for nature conservation in South Africa.

The water in the vlei is shallow and there are a few small islands. Sedge beds around part of the shore give nesting sites and shelter for aquatic birds. The birds also affect the sedge; it takes more than a year for it to recover from the wreckage caused by a nesting colony of egrets.

In the spring gales tear through the sanctuary, wrenching up the sedge by the roots—sometimes starting new sedge colonies when the drifting clumps reach shore. During these gales young birds may be killed and trees damaged, for Rondevlei is only three miles from False Bay which has a severe climate.

Near the centre of the vlei there is a sandy island, much loved by ducks, herons and pelicans for its security, but under water for eight months of the year. To try to make this island permanent, fourteen hundred cubic yards of sand were dredged from the bottom and added to it. The warden turfed the banks on the southern side and built a barrier of branches against wind and wave erosion. But within a year the new land level had dropped a foot and the island was again usually under water; so a raft was moored nearby and provided a satisfactory substitute for permanent land.

Before the sanctuary was established there was no heronry at Rondevlei. Then, in the spring of 1952, as if to greet the new

reserve, about four hundred birds nested together in a sedge bed on the south-east of the vlei. Grey herons, black-headed herons, night herons, reed cormorants, yellow-billed egrets, little egrets, cattle egrets; all these occupied an area only seventy yards by twenty-five.

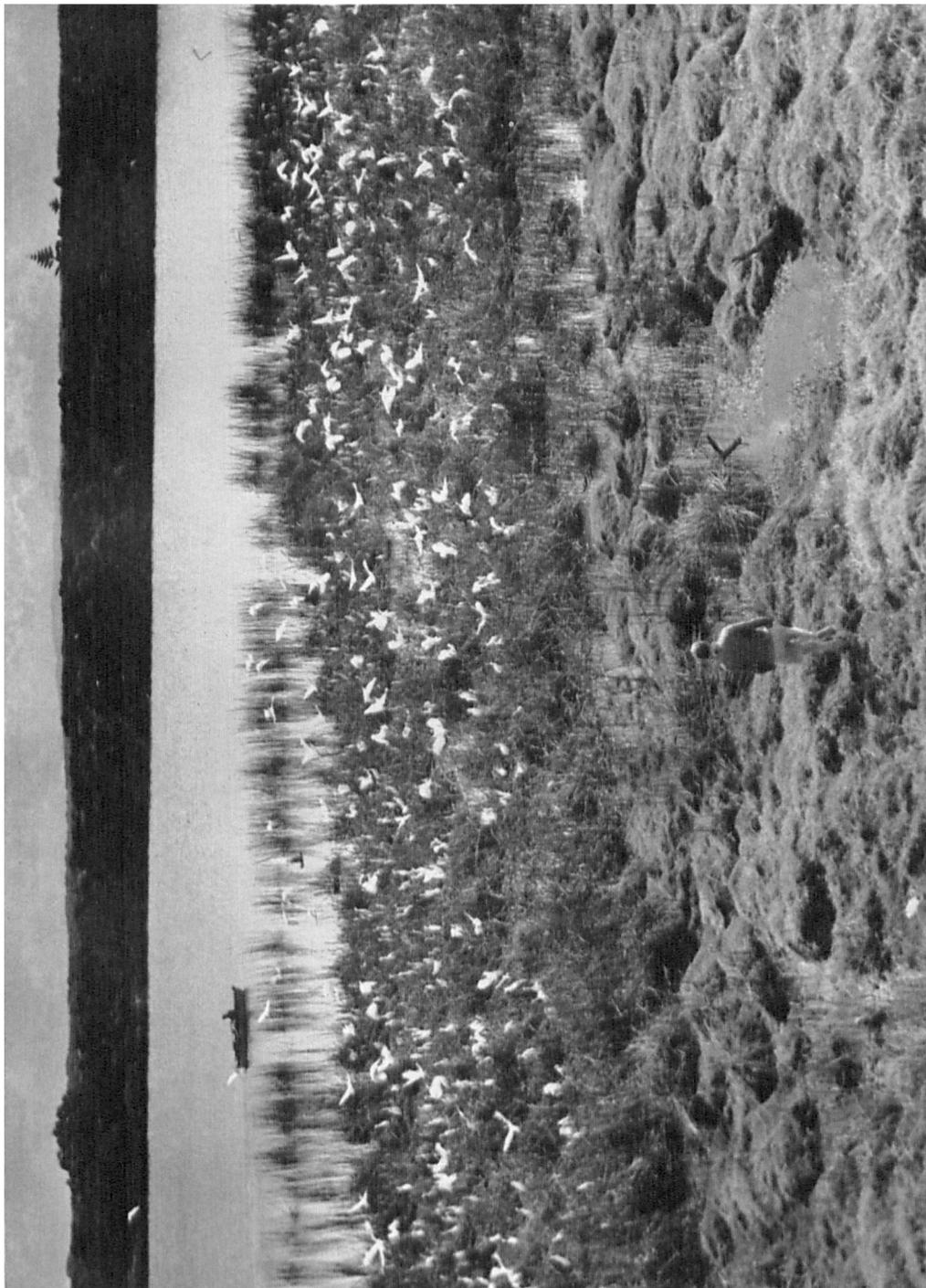
During the next winter, June, 1953, a large company of cattle egrets changed their roost from the neighbouring Zeekovlei to the sanctuary. Zeekovlei means sea-cow lake, hence hippopotamus lake, for hippos once lived in these vleis. The egrets remained to nest and brought the year's breeding population of the heronry up to eleven hundred, including a new colony of seventy darters. Even when breeding for 1953 was over, a thousand egrets continued roosting at Rondevlei. They were a beautiful sight in the evening as they arrived, flying in over the fence by groups, often landing just in front of the warden's house.

In 1954, early in August, not less than one thousand nests were started in the heronry. Irrespective of species, for there seemed no division between them, the first birds chose the sedge growing in the deeper water, but always with a fringe protecting them from the open vlei. The next nested landwards of the first, and so on, until the whole bed was crammed, sometimes one nest to a square yard, sometimes six. All were of dry acacia twigs on a foundation of sedge stems bent inwards. Sometimes a little grass was added.

The young were extremely active, adept at climbing the sedge and soon the nests disintegrated under the tramp of juvenile feet. Then the young banded themselves into large parties and family units were lost. It is not known yet whether parents feed only their own offspring or whether feeding becomes indiscriminate. By the end of November the young had begun to join the morning flight from the sanctuary.

Hérons and their near relatives are only some of the interesting birds which inhabit or visit Rondevlei. From January to March the duck population exceeds three thousand, of six species.

From February to July, 1952, up to three hundred flamingos at a time, both greater and lesser, found a resting-place there, when these birds returned to the Cape after eleven years' absence. Only two other birds worried the flamingos—pelicans, which occasionally chivvied them for fun, and sea eagles which mildly disconcerted them. Aeroplanes, on the other hand, disturbed them dreadfully. Any plane, however high, put them up and a plane wickedly flying low over the water might drive them away for several days.



[*Cape Argus*

RONDEVLEI BIRD SANCTUARY, SOUTH AFRICA.
With Mr. E. Middlemiss, the Warden.

Many curious things have been observed. A purple gallinule drove from their nests in turn a yellow-billed and a cattle egret and ate their eggs. Then it turned its attention to a sitting darter but got a hot reception from the darter's dagger beak. A night heron, perhaps always the same individual, was often seen to plunder the nests of egrets and to swallow the young head first as though they were fish, the parents offering no objection. A grey heron's nest with three eggs was appropriated by a marsh harrier, which laid another egg in it and started incubating the four. Three eggs disappeared, but the harrier continued sitting on the fourth, a heron's egg. Eventually that also went and with it the harrier, but a grey heron added sticks to the nest, laid four eggs and hatched them.

Rondevlei is also a scientific observatory. By the end of 1954, 154 species had been recorded and 3,709 birds of forty-nine species ringed. The climate, the chemistry of the water, the growth of the sedge beds, the life of the fauna other than birds, are all carefully studied. The warden is devoting an old cottage on the north-east shore of the vlei to a museum of the fauna and flora of his reserve.

The public were excluded from Rondevlei for the first three years of its existence, a policy which has been amply justified. But from 1st January to 1st July this year, certain parts were opened to parties of not more than fifteen people at a time. In his report for 1954, the warden wrote of the preparations for these visitors and for the herons and egrets "should they again return". Now in October, 1955, it is good to be able to report that nest-building is once again in full swing.