

# The Gambia's First Nature Reserve

## *Sir Landsborough Thomson*

Following its policy of helping small countries, which have special difficulties in protecting their wildlife, the FPS Council asked Sir Landsborough Thomson, one of our Vice-Presidents, to investigate the proposed Abuko nature reserve in The Gambia, for which we had received an appeal for help. This is the first and only reserve in this small independent state (200 miles long by less than 20 wide). On the basis of his favourable report the FPS advanced £3000 from the FPS/WWF Revolving Fund to pay for the necessary fencing. In an interview with the Prime Minister, Sir Landsborough learned of the other proposed conservation measures likely to be promulgated in this forward-looking country in the near future.

The Gambia in West Africa is a country about 4000 square miles in extent, lying around 13° 30' N. lat. It has an Atlantic seaboard of some 35 miles but otherwise consists essentially of two riparian strips, each averaging less than ten miles in width, on either side of the great river from which the name is taken. The territory extends eastwards to the limit of navigation—approximately 200 miles from the coast in a straight line, but nearly 300 miles following the bends of the stream. There are some low hills inland, but most of the country is so flat that residual tidal effects and salinity—and hence mangrove swamps—reach a long way upstream. The rest is grass-woodland savanna, with acacias, baobabs and rhun (*Borassus*) palms as characteristic trees; there is almost no real forest.

The Gambia was the earliest of the British territories in West Africa—part colony and part protectorate—and in 1965 it became an independent member of the Commonwealth; a republican constitution was adopted in 1970. The country has about a third of a million inhabitants divided among four main tribes, each with its own tongue and overlapping the political frontiers. The inhabitants of the small capital, Bathurst, are to some extent detribalised; English is the official language. Except for the coast, the country is entirely surrounded by 'francophone' Senegal.

The country is rich in birds and reptiles, and in the smaller mammals. Of the really large mammals only the hippopotamus remains, although elephants and giraffes formerly lived there and lions occasionally wander in from adjacent territories; in the next order of size, baboons and warthogs are numerous, and leopards and harnessed antelopes are still to be found. All in all, it is a very interesting fauna.

The President (lately Prime Minister), Sir Dauda Jawara, is a member of the Fauna Preservation Society; he is most anxious to see the wildlife of his country preserved. Among other things, he has supported the endeavours to this end of Mr. E. F. Brewer, Forestry Development Officer in the Agricultural Department of The Gambia

(and FPS Correspondent for The Gambia). The chief of these efforts has been the creation of the Abuko Nature Reserve, the first of its kind in the country. The present writer was able to see the site (practically inaccessible on earlier visits) while spending a few weeks as guest of the Director of the UK Medical Research Council's laboratories at Fajara in January 1970.

### **Forest and Savanna**

The Reserve is an oblong of 153 acres, and its entrance is twelve miles from Bathurst on a main road. The land has been enclosed since 1912 as a water catchment area, and although latterly its use for that purpose has been abandoned, access continued to be forbidden; much of it had in any event become virtually impenetrable. Down the centre runs the small Lamin stream, dammed to form a lake at the lower end. For about 75 yards on each side of the stream there is dense riverine forest, unique in the country and said to be of considerable botanical interest. A winding path has now been cut through this, going up on one side and returning on the other.

Flanking the forest strip, there is on each side a further 400 yards' width of savanna, with long grass and relatively sparse trees, which is typical of the country but has in this instance for long been free from cultivation or grazing. It is proposed to construct a few branch paths into this savanna, leading to observation platforms with salt-licks nearby. There is already such a platform overlooking the lake, with fixed telescopes for watching the crocodiles (which haul up in the open on the opposite shore), water birds, and so on.

The policy is to protect the animals already in the reserve, and gradually to introduce other species that are or have been indigenous to the country (although for practical reasons such animals as elephant and lion could not be included). Red colobus and green vervet monkeys abound; leopard and large troops of red patas monkeys have been seen, and there are harnessed antelope, genets, porcupines, servals, caracals, civets, mongoose and duikers. An abundance of bird life includes several species of which there was until quite recently no record, or no modern record, from The Gambia. Snakes include cobras, royal and African pythons and green mambas.

### **Fencing Essential**

To prevent animals such as antelopes from wandering outside and being killed (as has already happened), it is essential that there should be a more adequate barrier than the present perimeter fencing. It is accordingly intended to erect a stronger fence 40 feet inside the latter. The space between will provide a fire-break and patrol route, as well as a gap between animals near the new fence and persons outside the reserve. Heavy-duty chain-link fencing is considered necessary, buried to a depth of one foot and seven or eight feet high. There are already enclosures at the far end of the Reserve for 'orphans' or introduced animals not yet ready for release into the main area.

Hitherto the reserve has been on a provisional footing under Mr. Brewer's wing, but stability for the future is now assured. When I saw

the Prime Minister (as he then was) on behalf of the FPS Council, he said that the preparation of an ordinance would be put in hand at once with a view to enactment within a few months. The Council has since agreed to advance £3000 from the Society's Revolving Fund (for eventual repayment by the international World Wildlife Fund) to enable an immediate start to be made with the fencing; and it is understood that this is being augmented by a grant from an American source.

Meanwhile, even on the provisional basis, the Reserve attracted over 2000 visitors during the dry season of 1969-70, including tourists (mainly Swedish at present) but not counting organised parties of school-children. The project is attracting considerable interest among local residents.

Other fauna preservation matters were discussed with the (then) Prime Minister, and the auguries are promising in several directions. Proposals that are being actively pursued include: adding further species to the present short list of protected birds; tightening the control over the issue of gun-licences; legislation against the sale of mammal skins, especially those of members of the cat family and otters, whether obtained in The Gambia or in adjacent territories; and a possible five-year ban on the shooting of crocodiles to give the greatly depleted population of this species a chance of building up again. All good fortune to these enlightened endeavours!

### **Cyprian Mouflon Study**

A scientific study is to be made of the Cyprian mouflon, in the Paphos Forest reserve in Cyprus. The Director of the Department of Forests writes that numbers have risen from about 15 (when the government made the reserve) to about 200, and 18 are kept in captivity as a breeding group. In 1967 the Cyprus government signed the IUCN form of acceptance of ultimate responsibility for its mouflon, which is a race of the Asiatic *Ovis orientalis*, not of the better known western Mediterranean mouflon *O. musimon*.

### **Sarawak Crocodiles**

In Sarawak there is concern at the number of very young crocodiles *Crocodylus porosus* being taken for their skins for export. In the first four months of this year 167 permits were given to take and export crocodiles mainly to Singapore; this compares with 70 permits for the whole of 1969. The baby crocodiles, for which sums up to \$15.00 are paid, are kept until two to three years old, then killed and the skins exported—a wasteful method that can only lead to their disappearance in time.

### **Poaching in Ceylon**

The World Wildlife Fund has equipped the Ceylon national parks with radio equipment to enable the park guards to cope with the ruthless poaching that is going on there. In a letter to WWF Mr de Alwis, Acting Warden of the Wildlife Department, points out that this is organised poaching for commercial ends: sambar and other deer for biltong; leopard, crocodile and bear for skins, which are smuggled out of the country, and elephant for ivory.