

THE AFRICAN WILD DOG

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The African Wild Dog, or Hunting Dog, *Lycaon pictus*, is a distinct species and is neither related to any domestic breed nor does it appear to be the forerunner of any known type of domestic dog: there are in fact certain structural differences, such as the absence of dew-claws. The dogs stand about twenty-six inches at the shoulder and measure about four feet from nose to tip of bushy tail. The colour is variable but is similar to that of a normal Alsatian, covered to a greater or lesser degree with black, yellow or white blotches. A notable feature is the large upstanding, rounded ears. There are recorded cases of the wild dog having been successfully tamed, but an objectionable smell renders them somewhat unpleasant as household pets.

Wild dogs hunt in packs, killing wantonly far more than they need for food, and by methods of the utmost cruelty: *Lycaon* does not kill quickly as the lion does but often starts to devour the antelope which is his victim before life is extinct. They do more damage than almost any other of the carnivora, for when they enter a particular stretch of country the disturbance they cause is so great that, for the time being, all the buck are driven out: indeed a strange absence of antelope from an area is often the first sign of the wild dogs' presence. A particularly unpleasant characteristic is that they will, without hesitation, turn upon any member of the pack that falls by the way through wound or sickness and show no reluctance to consume their own kind.

When the Uganda national parks were established it was considered necessary, as it had often been elsewhere, to shoot wild dogs in order to give the antelope opportunity to develop their optimum numbers. Fortunately only a few of these creatures have had to be destroyed and their number in the parks does not seem to be particularly large. Their habits do not allow them to stay for long in any one place, for they would starve if they did so: the wild dog packs create their havoc and move on.

The shooting of wild dogs has been questioned recently on the ground that, if persisted in, it would result in a disturbance of the balance of nature, in the maintenance of which they play a valuable part. It was argued that should the antelope increase beyond a reasonable limit, the inevitable result would be star-

vation due to overstocking and over-grazing, and moreover the very disturbance caused by the wild dogs acted as a valuable safeguard against inbreeding amongst the antelope. The removal of any of nature's predators would assist in bringing about these most undesirable conditions and in a national park, one of them, man, was already eliminated: it would be a mistake further to disturb the balance by removing another. It was said that the wild dog had as much right to exist in a park as had the leopard or any other of the carnivorae, a point which in fact raised the whole vexed and difficult issue of control in a national park. Here was a question of principle as well as practice.

As a result of this argument I found myself consulting a number of authorities and trying to get my own thoughts in order, for clearly this was a many sided question. There is a surprising divergence of opinion in this matter and although some think that the wild dog should be destroyed on sight, he seems, on the whole, to have more friends than his habits suggest he deserves. On balance it appears clear that provided the packs do not increase beyond a reasonable size (and this is a most important proviso) they should not be interfered with. With wild animals generally, the rate of breeding and the percentage of those born to reach maturity is, in the absence of predators, largely controlled by the food supply. Generally speaking the infant mortality amongst the carnivorae seems relatively high, so that unless the food supply becomes abnormally easy, numbers just about maintain themselves. When any species gets access to an unnatural source of food, numbers can increase very rapidly, as happened (so Mr. Mervyn Cowie informed me) near Nairobi at the end of the last war, when there was an abattoir in what is now the Nairobi National Park.

In a national park conditions are particularly favourable to the antelope, so herds may increase to an abnormal size, providing in turn an easy food supply for the wild dogs. Whilst this is a development which would clearly need watching, the cause and effect would in fact be a natural compensation. On this matter Colonel Hoier, Warden of the Parc National Albert from 1929 to 1946, has much of interest to say in his *A Travers Plaines et Volcans au Parc National Albert*. In the early nineteen-thirties wild dogs were very numerous on the Ruwindi plains, which are almost contiguous to the Queen Elizabeth Park in Uganda; but subsequently they have never appeared in large numbers, although not interfered with in any way. Colonel Hoier observes that when conditions are too easy, the wild dogs lose something of their natural resistance to disease and become

particularly susceptible to distemper, which is then a potent factor in keeping their numbers down. He also points out that although litters are large, the number that reach maturity is small.

It seems, therefore, to be a safe conclusion that wild dogs have a useful function in nature and that they should not be classed automatically as undesirable elements whose presence in a sanctuary is entirely objectionable. The damage that they can cause, however, is so great that, should the packs appear in undue numbers, or should it seem that they are permanently reducing or disturbing the antelope herds of any given area, so that they do not return, authority should step in without delay.

During September, 1955, a pack of about eight wild dogs appeared in the Lolim area of the Murchison Falls National Park, which is one of the best strongholds of the Uganda kob. The kob left in large numbers, fortunately staying in the park and not running into hunters; they were home again within three weeks, apparently none the worse for their experience. The dogs had moved on by this time, and were next seen about twenty miles away near the park's air-strip at Wangkwar, also in good game country. The buck that usually meet the twice weekly plane were not present, but they only missed the service once.