



THE BONGOS OF BANGANGAI

Coveted by trophy hunters, taboo to local tribesmen, these elegant antelopes of Sudanese forests have earned a singular reputation for elusiveness

BY JESSE CHRISTOPHER HILLMAN



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THE MOON CLIMBED above the horizon, huge and orange at first, then shrinking to a smaller silver ball that flooded the ground below us with its soft white light. Perched in a tree platform 30 feet above a salt lick, we waited in silence for the largest of the forest antelope—the bongo—to appear. My game scout, Atanazio Awas, nudged me. Turning in the direction he indicated, I saw a black periscope poke above the head-high grass, followed by several others in line behind it: A group of forest elephants were testing the air for the source of the human scent. Periscopes down, they returned the way they had come, too wary to approach.

Soon we heard squelching noises coming from the flooded grassland to our right, the sound of feet being slowly lifted and carefully placed. The approaching animals had not yet sensed our presence. They filed on to the lick, and we were treated to a ghostly parade as the moonlight reflected off a string of white horn tips. I counted 44 bongos.

The animals flicked their tails incessantly and tossed their heads to rid themselves of the small white moths seeking their salty eye secretions. The younger bongos clustered around some elephant footprints filled with muddy water. One or two adults stared up into the canopy from time to time, their nostrils flared. Minor panic erupted and a few animals ran a short distance, then cautiously returned. Suddenly they all stampeded, creating a barrage of sucking noises as they recrossed the swamp.

The forest fell silent except for the occasional frog or cricket experimenting with a single note. The moonlight imparted a sense of unreality and made us wonder if it was all a dream as we dared draw breath once more.

BONGOS ARE related to bushbucks, nyalas, and sitatungas, as well as to those other spiral-horned antelopes with vertical white body stripes—the

The grass at Bangangai Game Reserve grows 12 feet tall, but in early spring it is still short enough to reveal bongos (a male, opposite).

kudus and the elands. A rich chestnut in color, they have a variety of white marks on the face, neck, and legs. Not quite as large as elands nor as tall as greater kudus, they weigh up to 650 pounds and stand 40 to 50 inches high at the shoulder. They are found from Sierra Leone to southwest Sudan along the northern edge of the West African and Zaire forests, and in remnants of mountain forests in Kenya.

We were observing bongos in Bangangai Game Reserve in southwest Sudan under a project initiated by the New York Zoological Society at the

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request of the Southern Regional Government of Sudan. In addition to studying bongos, our task was to draw up management plans for the area and explore the possibilities for tourism. Bangangai had been set aside as a reserve in the 1940s primarily to protect bongos and their habitat, but no one had ever studied the region in depth.

The reserve is long and thin, encompassing 60 square miles and extending nine miles at its widest point. Lying on the watershed of the Nile and Zaire river systems, it contains many small streams, most of which are seasonal. It is an area best described as a forest/savanna mosaic, that is, patches of dense forest interspersed with fingers of wooded grasslands. The forest floor is a tangle of creepers and thick undergrowth. In the clearings, grass grows to a height of 12 feet and can be traversed only if the lead hiker forces it down with a heavy stick. In the dry season (November to February) the grass is burned to improve access and visibility.

Although most of the forest is secondary, a result of centuries of slash-and-burn cultivation by the native Zande people, small pockets of virgin tropical forest exist in the stream beds. The Zande moved out of the area when the reserve was created but

lived and cultivated there again for seven years during the civil strife of the 1960s. The land is now returning to a more natural state but the effects of man are still evident.

During the two and a half years we were at Bangangai, poachers from Zaire were apprehended three times. Armed with homemade powder guns manufactured from truck steering columns, muzzle-loaders from the last century, and American automatics from the Zairian army, they were looking for ivory and meat, as the wildlife in the neighboring Zaire area is exhausted.

IARRIVED AT BANGANGAI in June 1980 and set up camp in a small forest clearing. Atanazio, who grew up in the area and is now in charge of the reserve, helped me recruit Zande guides. Excellent trackers, the Zande are well acquainted with the local plants and animals and were happy to share their knowledge with me.

Tracking the bongos proved to be a frustrating experience. After stalking with great difficulty through the dense understory, our reward—if we were lucky—was a flash of red fur a few feet away or the sound of a bongo crashing into the woods, to be seen no more that day. I soon concluded that the best way to see bongos was to sit at one of the many salt licks and wait for them to come to me.

Bongos are active mainly in the early morning and at night. Three nights a month during the full moon we would sit patiently in our tree platform; at other times we used a ground-level blind near another lick before dawn. All our work was done on foot and we always walked between licks to maximize sightings. If undisturbed, animals sometimes remained at a lick for as long as three hours. More often, however, our observations were brief. Bongos are extremely shy, partly because Sudan still allows them to be hunted . . . and there were several hunting camps near the reserve. Trophy hunters claim the bongo is the most beautiful and difficult antelope to acquire; they call it the "ghost of the forest" because they can seldom enjoy more than fleeting glimpses.

The Zande get all their meat from trapping wild animals—especially antelopes—in spring snares, nets, and

pitfalls. Curiously, tribesmen from Sudan have a system of taboos that protects bongos. They believe they will contract leprosy from merely touching the animal, let alone eating it, and if a bongo falls into a pit trap, it is abandoned.

One of the Zande hunting techniques that intrigued me was that of "calling" the animals. Several of the men were able to produce the call by pinching their nose between thumb and forefinger and mewing like a cat. At the same time, they would stamp their feet or strike the flat side of a machete against the ground while shaking a small bush or branch with their free hand or foot. I observed them lure colobus monkeys and duikers, whose mating calls the mewing sound resembles.

The Zande are equally adept at communicating among themselves with "talking drums." The drums are wooden logs with the center portion carved out and a narrow slit left along the top. When the men beat the sides of the logs with sticks, the sound resonates in the hollow centers and can carry for about five miles. News travels fast.

I sometimes wondered if I was an important enough personage to be included in their dispatches. I may have made the crime news on a couple of occasions: One night I woke up in my tent to discover a man standing beside me. He exited hurriedly—and so did I, stark naked I chased him for 50 yards or so before realizing the danger and futility of the exercise. The reserve lies on the boundary with Zaire and any thief can easily escape across the border.

Shortly after this incident I went to Nairobi to write a report on my progress and make preparations to continue my study. I returned to Bangangai with my wife, Sheila, six months later. We set up camp in a new area near a river but soon discovered a severe flaw in our tent. It rained all of our first night there, and the roof collected water like a giant basin. We coped with the flood as best we could and spent the next day drying out and moving camp.

About a week later, we woke up one morning to find that our tent had been cut open during the night and our money, passports, binoculars, and other valuables stolen. We retreated

to the nearest town, Yambio, 63 miles away, and reported the incident to the police. Two weeks later we heard that some passports had been found and given to the authorities. We never managed to get the full story, but it seemed that the thief had stopped to sort out what he wanted and had left the rejected objects in the forest, where they were found by a woman collecting firewood. The passports were ant-eaten and rain-soaked but legible. The new, cheaper binoculars

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had been taken, the battered, expensive ones left behind.

Our first priority was to build a house in which our things would be secure. We decided on a two-story design 10 feet square and 18 feet high. The lower story, with no windows, would be our burglar-proof store-room. We constructed it of ironstone, which we dug ourselves and fashioned into blocks, using termite mud for mortar. A local teak plantation provided the material for the upper story, which was to be our bedroom and office. Together with a few local helpers we cut down the trees and sawed them into logs. Thatching the roof was the biggest problem because the Zande are not used to heights and I had to finish that job myself. After six weeks we had our house. Our spirits lifted and we felt we could go on with our research.

ALTHOUGH TRACKING BONGOS was difficult, it was the best way to gather information about their feeding habits. The animals browsed mainly where forest met grassland. We collected samples of the plants they ate and identified more than 100 species including young grass shoots and herbs that sprang up in the post-fire period of flush, the lower leaves and fallen fruits of tall trees, and the bushy plants and rampant vines beneath the forest canopy. We saw bon-

gos use their horns to bring creepers and tree branches within reach of their mouths. We also asked the hunters in nearby camps to save the stomach contents of all the bongos they shot, which provided us with more information about the animals' diets.

Each bongo has its own distinctive pattern of white stripes, making it easy to identify individuals. We thought this knowledge would enable us to gain insight into group social structure, but we found its usefulness severely limited. While at Bangangai we saw bongos on only 40 occasions and positively reidentified individuals only three times. The largest group we saw was that of the 44 animals beneath our tree platform. Groups of five or more always included young; smaller groups consisted exclusively of adults; lone animals were usually adult males.

We were disappointed at being unable to uncover more information about these elusive, elegant antelopes. We never learned the exact size and composition of the population, though we estimated it to be around 2,000 within the reserve and surrounds. While studying the interaction between bongos and their habitat, we collected as much information as possible about the other forest animals.

Bangangai is a meeting point for the floras and faunas of East and West Africa. We had a mixture of black plains buffalos and western red forest buffalos all in one group. The elephants were of the forest, or pygmy, race, usually found in western Africa. There were four species of duikers: the blue, the red-flanked, the yellow-backed, and the gray, or bush or savanna, duiker. All three of Africa's wild pigs roamed the reserve: the bushpig, the giant forest hog, and the warthog. Nine primate species were present, ranging from the tiny bushbaby to the chimpanzee.

The birds, too, reflect the east-west mixture. Those from East Africa included the crested guinea fowl, the bronze-naped pigeon, the white-browed coucal, and the cinnamon-chested bee-eater. Among the West African birds were the long-tailed hawk, the black-headed bee-eater, the West African goshawk, and the great blue turaco. The standard-winged nightjar is a migrant to the area; the extreme devel-



An individual bongo can be easily identified by its unique pattern of white stripes. This photo, taken at a breeding facility in Florida, also shows the impressive horn sweep of the striking antelope.

opment of one of its flight feathers makes it look as if it is being mobbed by two very small birds as it flies.

The butterflies were a continual spectacle. The most common, a glider species, would appear by the thousands during their migration. The orange-and-black wings of the females were patterned like Persian carpets. They sought any source of salt, whether it

was a lick, a patch of wet cement, or ourselves when we returned from walking in the heat of the day. Our pet banded mongoose took advantage of this and had many an easy meal.

ALTHOUGH Bangangai still had much to teach us, we reluctantly decided not to continue our survey. Our lack of progress in studying bongos

and the growing political unrest in Sudan contributed to our decision. It was disheartening to leave the job unfinished, but we felt we had learned enough to make some constructive management recommendations.

I feel the project's greatest contribution was the "Wildlife Information Booklet," which we wrote to help game scouts in southern Sudan protect their natural resources. The booklet contains such things as range maps, illustrations and behavior descriptions of the animals, and a summary of the conservation laws. NYZS has produced 2,000 copies which have been in great demand in and out of the country.

The prospects for maintaining the bongo and its habitat are reasonably good. The reserve is located in a remote part of Sudan, bordered by a remote part of Zaire. We recommended that it be widened so the bongos and other animals are not forced to live so close to the unpoliced Zaire border. We also proposed that an adjacent reserve be set up on the Zaire side.

Tourism possibilities in Bangangai are poor. Sport hunting by Westerners brings the only wildlife-generated revenue into the area at the moment. Bangangai is difficult to reach, and accommodations and supplies simply do not exist there. The current political situation makes it unlikely that things will improve quickly.

Bangangai probably will not change much in the near future if a check on human activity is maintained. I hope the bongo will continue to inhabit its leafy realm and be able to coexist with man in the face of limited resources. My fear is that basic human needs might lead to the irreversible exploitation of Bangangai's forest remnants, and the ghost in name will become a ghost in reality. □

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