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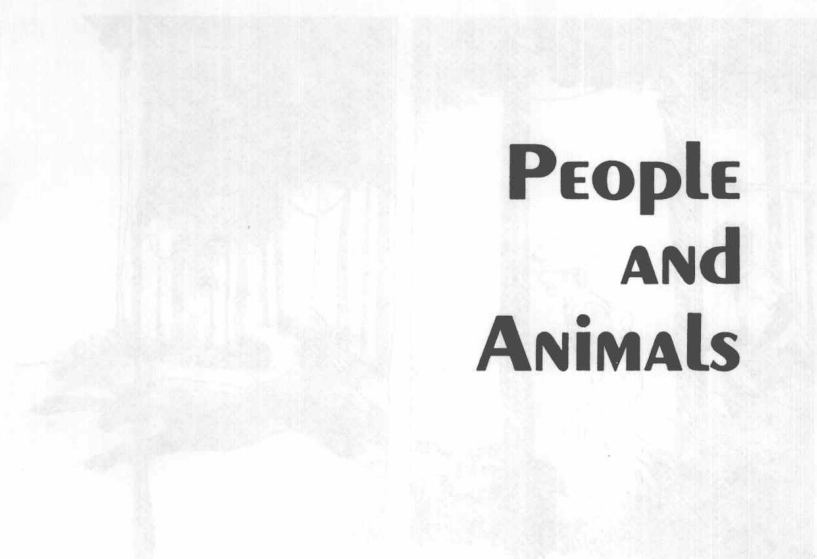
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# People AND Animals



# COLLECTING IN THE CAMEROONS

GERALD DURRELL

*When you go to the zoo, do you ever wonder who captured the animals? Here you can read about a famous collector and his experiences in the jungles of Africa.*

Most people at one time or another pay a visit to the zoological gardens. While there, they are so interested in the animals to be seen that they do not stop to wonder how a great many of them got to the zoo in the first place.

I am an animal collector and my job is to travel to the far-away places where these beasts live, and bring them back alive for the zoos.

Most people have no idea of the hard work and worry that go into a collecting trip to produce the fascinating birds and animals that they pay to see in the zoo. One of the questions that I am always asked is how I became an animal collector in the first place. The answer is that I have always been interested in animals and in zoos.

According to my parents, the first word I was able to say with any clarity was not the conventional "Mamma" or "Dadda," but the word "Zoo," which I would repeat over and over again in a shrill voice until someone, in order to shut me up, would take me to the zoo. When I grew a little older, we lived in Greece and I had a great number of pets, ranging from owls to sea horses, and I spent all my spare time exploring the countryside in search of fresh specimens to add to my collection of pets. Later on I went for a year to Whipsnade Zoo, as a student keeper, to gain experience with larger animals such as lions, bears, bison, and ostrich, which were not so easy to keep at home. When I left, I luckily had enough money of my own to be able to finance my first trip and I have been going out regularly ever since then.

Though a collector's job is not an easy one and is full of many disappointments, it is certainly a job which will appeal to all those who love animals and travel. I feel that the hard work and disappointments are nearly always more than offset by the thrill of your successes and the excitement and pleasure not only of capturing your animals but seeing them alive in their natural haunts.

Before starting out on a collecting trip you have to know what wild animals are wanted by the zoos; then, knowing their whereabouts, you choose those areas in which not only the specimens required are to be found, but other rare crea-

tures as well. Zoologists and biologists, generally, have not the time or the money to travel to these distant corners of the earth to find out about wildlife on the spot. Therefore, the animals have to be caught and brought back to them, so that they can be studied more conveniently in the zoo. Now the larger and commoner creatures from most parts of the world are well represented in nearly all zoological collections, and quite a lot is known about them. So it was the smaller and rarer beasts, about which we know so little, that I wanted to collect. It is about them that I am going to write.

From many points of view it is sometimes the small animals in a country that influence man more than the large ones. At home, for instance, the brown rat does more damage every year than any of the larger creatures. It was for this reason that I concentrated during my collecting trips on the smaller forms of life. For my first expedition I chose the Cameroons, since it is a small, almost forgotten corner of Africa, which is more or less as it was before the advent of the white man. Here, in the gigantic rain forests, the animals live their lives as they have done for thousands of years.

It is of great value to get to know and study these wild creatures before they are influenced by civilization, for wild animals can be affected just as much by change as people. One of the results of cutting down forests, building towns, damming rivers, and driving roads through jungle, is an interference with their way of life, and they have either to adapt themselves to the new conditions or die out.

At the time of this trip the British Cameroons was a tiny strip of territory shaped rather like a shoe box and wedged between Nigeria and French West Africa. It lay in what is called the rain forest area, so you find there the same sort of thick, steamy forest as in the Congo.

When I arrived in the Cameroons for the first time what struck me most was the very vivid coloring of the under-

growth and the enormous size of the trees. There were leaves of every shade of green and red imaginable, from bottle green to pale jade, and from pink to crimson. The trees towered up to two hundred and three hundred feet into the air, their trunks almost the circumference of a factory chimney, and their massive branches weighed down with leaves and flowers and great coiling creepers.

I landed at the little port of Victoria and had to spend a week or so there, preparing for the journey into the interior. A great many things had to be done before I could start on the actual work of collecting. There were people to engage as cooks or houseboys, various stores to buy and a great many other things as well. Also the necessary permits to hunt and capture the animals I was after had to be obtained, for all the animal life in the Cameroons is strictly protected and, unless you obtain government permission, you are not allowed to capture or kill any animals or birds. Eventually, when all this had been done, a lorry was hired and the food and equipment piled into it, and I set off. In those days there was only one way leading into the interior of the Cameroons and this, if followed far enough, led you to the village of Mamfe on the banks of the Cross River, some three hundred miles from the coast. It was at this village I had chosen to make my base camp.

Three days after leaving the coast I reached Mamfe. I had chosen this village as a base camp for a variety of reasons. When you are collecting wild animals you have to choose your base very carefully: it has to be within fairly easy reach of some sort of store, so that you can obtain sufficient supplies of tinned food, nails, wire netting and other important things, and also it has to be fairly near a road, so that when the time comes to depart you can bring your lorries near enough to the camp to load up. Secondly, you have to make sure that your base is going to be in a good collecting area, a place that is



not so full of farms and people that most of the wild animals have been driven away. Mamfe was excellent in this respect, so a camp clearing was made on the banks of the river, about a mile away from the village, and the big marquee, I had bought was erected. For the next six months this marquee was to act as a home for me and my animals.

The first thing I had to do, before I could even start collecting, was to make sure that the base camp was functioning smoothly. Cages, pens, and ponds had to be built, as well as palm-thatched huts for the workers I employed. I had to arrange for an adequate food and water supply, for when you have collected two hundred or three hundred animals and birds, they manage to eat and drink a very great quantity every day. Another important thing was to interview as many of the local chiefs as possible, showing them drawings and photographs of the creatures I wanted, and telling them how much I was willing to pay for specimens. Then, when they went back to their villages, they told their people, and so eventually I had all the villagers for miles around helping me in my work.

Then, when everything was ready and there was a great pile of empty cages waiting to be filled, I could start hunting the strange animals that I had traveled so far to find.

There are really no set rules about capturing animals. It all depends on the type of country in which you are operating and the sort of animals you want to get hold of. There were several different methods that I used in the Cameroons, and one of the most successful was to hunt in the forest with the aid of native hunting dogs. These dogs wear little wooden bells round their necks, so that when they disappear into the thick undergrowth in pursuit of an animal you will know where they are and can follow them by the clonking noise these bells make.

One of the most exciting hunts of this sort occurred when

I went up the mountain called N'da Ali, twenty-five miles from the base camp. I had been told by native hunters that on the upper slopes of this mountain there was found a rare animal which I particularly wanted, the black-footed mongoose, a very large mongoose, pure creamy white in color with chocolate-colored legs and feet. I knew that a live specimen of this animal had never been seen in England, and so I was determined to try to capture one if I possibly could.

We set off on our hunt very early one morning, four hunters as well as myself, and a pack of five rather mangy-looking dogs. One of the drawbacks of this type of hunting is that you cannot explain to the dogs exactly what sort of animal it is you want to catch, and so they pick up the scent of any and every creature in the forest and follow it. The result is that while you might go out hunting for a mongoose, it is more likely that you will end up catching something completely different. As a matter of fact that is exactly what did happen. We had been walking for about half an hour through the forest when the dogs picked up a fresh scent and rushed off yapping excitedly, with the sound of their bells echoing through the trees. We set off in hot pursuit, and for half an hour followed the distant sounds of the pack, running as hard as we could and feeling more and more exhausted. Suddenly, the leading hunter came to a stop and held up his hand. We stood there, panting for breath and straining our ears for the sound of the bells, but the forest around us was silent.

We spread out in a circle and walked among the trees in different directions, trying to find out which way the pack had gone. At last a shrill yodel from one of the hunters sent us all hurrying to the spot where he was waiting, and in the distance we could hear the sound of running water. As we ran toward it, the hunter explained to me, between gasps for breath, that if the dogs had been led to the edge of the river by the quarry,

the roaring of the water would cover up the noise of the bells. This explained how we had managed to lose the pack. When we reached the water, we splashed our way upstream and came eventually to a place where the water cascaded and foamed over a small waterfall some twenty feet high. Around the base of the fall was a great jumbled mass of huge boulders fully overgrown with moss and small plants, and among these big rocks we could see the tails and the rear ends of the dogs, while above the roar of the water we could hear their shrill yapping. Peering among the rocks, we saw for the first time what it was we had been hunting: it was a tremendous Nile monitor, a great lizard, measuring six feet in length, with a long whiplike tail and heavy curved claws on his feet. He had backed himself into a cul-de-sac among the rocks and was facing the opening and keeping the pack at bay by lashing with his great tail and hissing with open mouth if they ventured too close.

We were about to call the dogs off when one of them, more stupid than the rest, rushed in among the rocks and grabbed hold of the monitor's neck, hanging on as tightly as she could. The monitor returned the compliment by clasp ing her ear in his mouth, and then hunching himself up he brought his great hind legs on to the dog's back, ripping the skin open with his sharp claws. The dog, giving a yelp of pain, let go of his neck, and, as she started to retreat, the monitor lashed round with his tail and sent her rolling over and over among the rocks. Hastily we called the rest of the dogs off and tied them to a nearby tree, and then we had to decide on the best way to capture the lizard, who lay hissing among the rocks like some great prehistoric monster.

We tried to throw a net over him but the sharp-edged rocks kept getting caught in the folds, and in the end we gave this up as a bad job. The only other method I could think of was to climb up above him and, while someone attracted his

attention, get a noose round his neck. Explaining to the hunters what I wanted done, I scrambled up over the slippery rocks until I was perched about six feet above the place where the monitor lay. I made a running noose at the end of a long piece of rope and then, leaning over, lowered it gently toward the reptile. He did not appear to associate the length of rope with the human beings about him, and so it was quite easy for me to work the noose over his head and pull it back gently until it lay round his neck. Then I pulled it tight.

Unfortunately, in my excitement, I had forgotten to tie the end of the rope to anything and, what is more, I was kneeling on the loose end. As soon as the monitor felt the noose tighten round his neck, he shot forward like a rocket, pulling the rope taut, so that it jerked my knees from under me and I started to slip over the edge of the rock. On that smooth surface, wet with spray from the waterfall, I could find nothing to grip, and so I slipped over the edge and crashed down in the gully below. As I fell, I remember hoping that the monitor would be so frightened by my sudden appearance out of the clouds that he would not wait to give battle. I had no desire to get any closer than necessary to his well-armed feet. Luckily, that is exactly what happened. The monitor was so startled that he dashed out from among the rocks and scuttled off down the river bank, trailing the rope behind him. But he did not get very far, for as soon as he was clear of the rocks, the natives threw the net over him and within a few seconds he was writhing and hissing in its folds. We eventually got him out of the net and tied to a long pole, and I dispatched one of the hunters back to camp with him. I was extremely pleased to have caught this big reptile, but it was not exactly what we had come up the mountain to hunt for, and so we continued on our way through the forest.

It was not long before the dogs picked up a fresh scent. The chase they led us on this time was a far longer one and

much more interesting than our chase after the monitor had been. First of all, the animal we were hunting ran downhill and we had to run desperately down the slope, leaping and jumping over fallen rocks, which was really rather dangerous as a slip could have meant a broken leg or something even worse. Then our quarry turned round and ran uphill again, and we were forced to follow, with our hearts pounding and with sweat streaming off us. This hunt lasted for three-quarters of an hour and eventually, following the sound of the dog bells, we came to a level area of forest where we found the pack grouped round one end of a great hollow tree trunk that lay across the forest floor. Sitting in the mouth of the hollow trunk was a big white animal with a curiously bearlike face and small ears. He was staring with an expression of great scorn on his face at the dogs that were yapping and snarling around him. One of the dogs, I noticed, had a bite on his nose, and so I understood why they were keeping such a discreet distance from this strange animal. When the black-footed mongoose saw us, he turned round and disappeared into the hollow interior of the tree.

We called the pack off and placed a net over the end of the trunk and then went up to the other end to make sure there was no exit hole. There was none, and so we knew that the mongoose had only one way of getting out of the trunk, and that was guarded by our net. The only thing now was to get him out of the tree. Luckily, the wood was very rotten and soft, and so by cutting with our knives we managed to make a hole at the opposite end of the trunk to where the net had been hung. We then laid a small fire inside the hole, and when it was nicely alight we piled green leaves on top of it, so a thick pungent smoke rushed down the hollow tree. For some time we could hear the mongoose inside coughing in an irritated manner, but finally the smoke became too much for him and he shot out of the end of the trunk and

into the net where he rolled over and over, snapping and snarling. After a certain amount of difficulty, during which we were nearly all bitten, we managed to get him out of the net and into a strong bag. Then we carried him triumphantly back to camp. For the first two or three days he was very savage and would attack the bars of the cage whenever I went near. But after a while in captivity he grew quite tame and within two or three weeks would even come and take food from my hand, and let me scratch him behind his ears.

We went hunting every day and the camp started filling up with the specimens we had captured. It looked rather as though a circus had moved into the forest. Along one side of the tent was a line of cages in which I kept all the smaller animals, a great variety of creatures that ranged from mice to mongooses.

The first cage in the row belonged to a couple of baby red river hogs which I had called Puff and Blow, and they were the most charming pair of babies imaginable. A full-grown red river hog is about the most colorful and handsome of the pig family. Its fur is a rich orange-red color and along its back and neck is a mane of pure white fur; on the tips of its long, pointed ears are two dangling tufts of white hair. Puff and Blow, however, like all baby piglets, were striped; they were a dark chocolate brown, and their stripes were a light buttercup yellow, running from nose to tail. This made them look like fat little wasps, as they trotted around their pen.

Puff was the first one to arrive at the camp. He was brought in one morning, sitting rather sadly in a wicker basket balanced on the head of a native hunter. He had been captured in the forest, and I soon discovered the reason for his doleful appearance was that he had eaten nothing for two days, a thing that was enough to make any self-respecting pig look down in the snout. The hunter, who had caught him,

had tried to feed him on bananas but Puff was far too young for that sort of food. What he wanted was milk, and plenty of it. So, as soon as I had paid for him, I mixed a big bottleful of warm milk with sugar, and taking Puff onto my knees, I tried to make him drink. He was about the size of a pekinese, with very small hooves and a pair of sharp little tusks as well, as I soon found out to my cost.

Of course, he had never seen a feeding bottle before, and treated it with the gravest suspicion from the start. When I lifted him on to my knees and tried to put the rubber into his mouth, he decided that this was some special kind of torture I had invented for him. He screamed and squealed, kicking me with his sharp little hooves and trying to stab me with his tusks. After the struggle between us had lasted for about five minutes, both Puff and I looked as though we had been bathed in milk, but not a single drop of it had gone down his throat.

I filled another bottle and again grasped the squealing pig firmly between my knees, wedged his mouth open with one hand and started to squirt the milk in with the other. He was so busily squeaking for help that every time the milk was squirted into his mouth, the next squeal would spit it all out again. At last I was fortunate enough to get a few drops to trickle down his throat, and waited for him to get the taste of it, which he soon made apparent by stopping to yell and struggle, and by starting to smack his lips and grunt. I dribbled a little more milk into his mouth and he sucked it down greedily, and within a short while he was pulling away at the bottle as though he would never stop, while his tummy grew bigger and bigger. At length, when the last drop had disappeared from the bottle, he heaved a long sigh of satisfaction and fell into a deep sleep on my lap, snoring like a hive full of bees.

After that he was no more trouble, and after a few days

had lost all his fear of humans, and would run, grunting and squeaking delightedly, to the bars of his pen when he saw me coming, and flop over on his back to have his tummy scratched. At feeding time, when he saw the bottle coming, he would push his nose through the bars and scream shrilly with excitement, and, to hear him, you would think he had never had a square meal in his life.

After Puff had been with me for about two weeks, Blow arrived on the scene. She had also been caught in the forest by a native hunter and had objected to it most strongly. Long before she, or her captor, had appeared in sight, I could hear her loud squealing protest, and she never stopped once until I had bought her and put her into the cage next to Puff's. I did not house them together straight away, for she was a bit bigger than Puff, and I thought she might hurt him. As soon as he saw there was another pig like himself in the next cage he hurled himself at the bars between, grunting and squeaking with delight, and when Blow saw him, she stopped screaming and went over to investigate. They were as pleased to see each other as though they had been brother and sister. They rubbed noses through the bars, and since they seemed so friendly I decided to put them together straight away. In doing this I seemed justified, for they both ran forward and sniffed around each other excitedly: Puff gave a loud grunt and prodded Blow in the ribs with his nose; Blow grunted in return and skipped off across the cage. Then the fun started, around and around the cage Puff chased Blow; they ran, dodging and doubling, twisting and turning until both of them were quite exhausted and fell asleep on their bed of dry banana leaves, snoring and snoring until the whole cage vibrated.

Blow soon learned to drink from the bottle like Puff, but as she was a few weeks older, her diet included some solid food as well. So every day, after they had both had their bot-



bles, I would put a flat pan full of soft fruit and vegetables into the cage, and Blow would spend the morning with her nose stuck in the pan, squelching and snuffling about, dreamily, in true piggy fashion. Puff did not like this at all. He was too young to eat solid food himself and did not see why Blow should do so if he could not. He felt that he was being done out of something, and would stand and watch her as she ate with an angry expression on his face, grunting to himself peevishly. Sometimes he would try to drive her away from the food by pushing her with his head, and then Blow would wake up out of her dream among the mashed bananas and chase him angrily across the cage, squealing furiously. The longer Blow spent at her food pan, the more depressed Puff became.

The idea must have come to him one day that he too could get an extra meal by the simple method of sucking Blow's tail. I suppose her tail looked to him not unlike the end of the bottle from which he got his meal; anyway, he became convinced that if he sucked it long enough he would get an extra supply of delicious milk from it. So there Blow would stand, grunting to herself, her nose buried in the soft fruit, while behind her Puff would be solemnly sucking her tail. She did not mind this as long as he only sucked; occasionally, however, he would become annoyed and impatient because no milk appeared, and would start to tug and bite. Then Blow would whisk round and chase him into the corner, pushing him hard in the ribs, and return muttering angrily to her delicious plate of food. In the end, however, I was forced to separate them, only putting them together again for a game once a day, for Puff had sucked at Blow's tail so enthusiastically that he had removed all the hair and it had become quite bald. So for some time they lived next door to each other while Blow's tail grew new fur, and while Puff learned to eat solid food.