

New Hope for Wildlife in Jordan

By *Maisie Fitter*

A hunting club whose main task is wildlife conservation is Jordan's unique contribution to the task of saving the world's wildlife. A group of enthusiastic Jordanians, backed by the King and the Government, are making great strides in getting their message across to the people, enforcing the protection laws and at the same time building up the country's wildlife stocks.

THE outlook for the wildlife of Jordan was transformed last year with the founding of the Royal Jordanian Hunting Club and the promulgation of a new hunting law. This may sound ironical, but in fact the Hunting Club's main concern is wildlife conservation and its main task the enforcement of the law, and in its short life it has already made a very considerable impact.

Eastern Jordan, the country to the east of the Rift Valley (the line of the River Jordan, the Dead Sea and Wadi Araba) represents about nine-tenths of the area of Jordan but supports only about one-twentieth of the population. It is a country of spectacular mountains and vast deserts, inhabited mainly by the nomadic Bedouins. Since the turn of the century the wildlife has been disappearing fast: addax, crocodile and roe deer had gone by 1900, followed by wild ass and fallow deer by the early 1920's, the Syrian bear and probably the ostrich by 1941 (though a dead ostrich was found near Ma'an in the floods of 1966 suggesting that a remnant survived somewhere), the Arabian oryx in the 1940's. Cheetah and perhaps leopards appear to have survived in very small numbers, and ibex are said to be locally numerous in the more inaccessible mountains, but both gazelles, the Arabian *Gazella arabica* and the dorcas *G. dorcas*, have dwindled to a small remnant, although flourishing in large herds as recently as ten years ago. The houbara bustard has been driven into the remote eastern fringe.

To protect and build up again these remnant species and re-introduce some of the extinct ones are the declared aims of the Hunting Club, founded in the spring of 1966 with the blessing and support of HM King Hussein, who is Honorary President, and the government; the Minister of Agriculture has delegated the enforcement of the hunting laws to the club, along with police, forest guards and village mukhtars. All hunting and shooting in Jordan is now forbidden without a licence, which costs five dinars (£5) a year. Automatic weapons, nets and traps are prohibited, as are mechanical vehicles and spotlights; there are close seasons and bag limits for all game: for example, only one wild boar and one ibex may be taken twice a year; duck shooting is limited to two days a week (Friday and Sunday) in the season (October to March inclusive) with a bag limit of 20. In the desert region east of the Hedjaz railway all hunting is prohibited except at Azraq. The penalties for breaking the law are severe, with withdrawal of licence and confiscation of the firearm for a second

offence. To enforce the law the club has a manager, two inspectors and seven guards, equipped with two four-wheel drive vehicles, and in the seven months following its formation had apprehended seventy illegal hunters, including a number of army officers. Naturally this made the club very unpopular, but gradually the imperative need for conservation is being accepted. The club has shown that it means business, and those seventy prosecutions speak volumes. Recently the army has issued a stern directive about illegal hunting. The government has also agreed in principle to the club's proposal that shotguns should be withdrawn from Bedouins, shepherds and villagers, but this raises many difficult points and measures to implement it have not yet been taken.

The biggest task is education, and this the club is tackling with skill and enthusiasm under their far-sighted chairman, Mr. Ikilil Sati, Their manager, Mr. A. Bandak, a keen hunter himself, with an intimate knowledge of the country including the desert (he had been until his retirement a government inspector) is indefatigable in explaining, persuading and arguing, particularly to the military, the urgent need for conserving the wildlife that remains if only in order to have something left to hunt, and every publicity method is being tried. Posters are being designed, a set of postage stamps portraying the country's wild animals and birds is to be issued, and July 15 is to be observed every year as a national day for the protection of wildlife. Last year the day was observed with radio talks by the Prime Minister and the Ministers of the Interior and Agriculture, and a special radio play, articles in the newspapers, posters in the streets; pamphlets were distributed, colour slides shown in cinemas, and as a grand climax two helicopters of the Jordanian Royal Air Force dropped pamphlets on forty cities and villages—all stressing one theme: the need to protect and conserve wildlife. The sympathetic response and widespread promises of co-operation astonished even the organisers themselves. The Hunting Club is building its new headquarters in a small area of forested land just outside Amman which it has recently acquired, and plans to have a small zoo to show people their native animals. King Hussein has presented gazelles and ibex from his own collection with which to start the zoo when it is ready.

The Mountfort Expeditions

The plight of Jordan's wildlife was brought firmly to the attention of the west (and to Jordan itself) with the British expedition in 1963 to East Jordan, led by Guy Mountfort, at the invitation of King Hussein, followed by two others in 1965 and 1966. The recommendations of the first expedition, which was described by the leader in *Oryx* August 1964, were accepted by the Jordanian government. They included the declaration of three national parks; of these the one at Azraq was declared in July, 1965, and a draft management plan drawn up by two scientists of the British Nature Conservancy, J. H. Hemsley and Dr. M. George, following their reconnaissance in September, 1965, and that of Dr. J. Morton Boyd in November, 1964.

Azraq is a large oasis out in the desert some 70 miles east of Amman. The freshwater springs supply not only the two villages of the oasis, Azraq Shishan and Azraq Druze, but a large modern pumping station is taking water by pipeline to the large city of Irbid in northern Jordan. Moreover, the Qa el Azraq, a large saline depression, is flooded for four months of the year, forming a vast lagoon that is the wintering ground for great flocks of ducks and other water birds. It is proposed to set up a research station at Azraq as part of the *International Biological Programme*, and here too the *Hunting Club* has taken over the old hunting lodge from the army and has embarked on the building of a new up-to-date lodge. By the end of 1967 the Club expects to have two blocks each sleeping eight people where tourists as well as duck hunters will be welcomed, and which bird watchers should find specially rewarding, for vast hordes of migrants pass through Azraq in the spring, and to a lesser degree in autumn.

Goats, Donkeys, Sheep and Camels

Across the desert a few miles from the hunting lodge the Club has been able to take over a large fenced area, the former Shaumari agricultural research station. This they intend to use for breeding up stocks of animals and birds prior to release in the desert, and they are taking expert advice as to the best way to make use of it. The difference between the vegetation inside the fence and the hard-grazed desert outside is notable, even though local Bedouins have cut the fence in places and graze their camels inside. For overgrazing is almost the major problem in Jordan's open country. Every Bedouin family has its swarm of black goats and often donkeys, sheep and camels too, and until the government can implement its declared intention of drastically reducing the goat population the vegetation of the arid areas will never be able to recover.

In addition to Azraq the first British expedition recommended a national park in the south of Jordan centred on Wadi Rum, an incredibly spectacular area of flat sandy desert with vast mountains of bare rock often rising sheer to 2000 feet and more, and already seen by many as the setting for much of the film of "Lawrence of Arabia." Here the Arabian oryx was to be found even after the first world war and there are suggestions for reintroducing them. The snag is the proximity of the Saudi Arabian frontier, and it is not forgotten that it was sheikhs from this neighbouring country hunting in fast cars who helped to reduce the oryx to its present status. Now, with the assistance of American AID, a road has been built some way towards Wadi Rum (though not into it) and hotels in Aqaba, on the Red Sea, advertise day trips to see it. Other national parks to be established with the help of US AID include Petra, mainly for the archaeological interest of this world-renowned city carved in the rose-red sandstone rock, but also recommended for the wildlife interest of the country round. Work is going ahead now to provide access and facilities under the direction of Mr. R. F. Gibbs, of the USA National

Parks Service, who is acting as Deputy Director of National Parks in Jordan, and this park is expected to be declared shortly.

To-day the wildlife interest in Jordan is mainly the birds, but if the Royal Jordanian Hunting Club can get its way, if the hunting laws can be enforced and the goat population drastically reduced, it may be that gazelles and oryx, the wild ass and the addax, ostrich and houbara bustard, cheetah and ibex will be drawing the tourist from the west as the African game parks do to-day. In this the FPS intends to lead the way, and plans are now being made for a tour for its members to see the wildlife and deserts (and also of course the archæological wonders) of this extraordinarily interesting country. The interesting thing in Jordan is that the initiative for wildlife conservation and the drive for putting it into practice have come from the hunters, and it may well prove easier for the Jordanian people to accept the principles of conservation from them than it would from any other quarter.

As we go to press we learn that HM King Hussein has approved the creation of a new and widely representative body, The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, of which the Hunting Club will be the executive body.—Editor.

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any birds which may be discovered in what may be a last effort to locate them.

The position of the takahe *Notornis hochstetteri*, however, is more hopeful. Deer destruction in the Special Area has prevented further destruction of the habitat and strict control of entry has reduced disturbance to a minimum. But with a total population of not more than 200 birds, it is considered that continuing attempts should be made to breed birds in captivity. Further action is being taken this year.

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