

# Man as a Hunting Animal

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

*Illustrated by Garnet Jex*

THE MAMMALS, among which the zoologists classify man, are a varied assemblage of animals with the most diverse dietary habits. Some, like the grazing horse, the ant-eater, the three-toed sloth that browses almost exclusively upon the foliage of a single kind of tree, and the huge whales that subsist upon tiny marine animals, are highly specialized for eating and digesting a single type of food. Their teeth, alimentary tracts, and often their limbs as well, exhibit adaptations for the efficient gathering and utilization of the preferred nutriment. One need recall only the cow's peculiar dentition and complex, four-chambered stomach, which together form a remarkably effective apparatus for cropping, fermenting, and digesting green herbage. Others of the mammals, like the opossum and the rat, thrive upon a more varied diet; and their teeth, although perhaps less admirably adapted for cutting and triturating a particular food, are capable of dealing in a satisfactory manner with a wide range of vegetable and animal products.

Among these mammals with less specialized dentition and more varied diet are the primates, the group to which man belongs. Although some, like the howling monkeys of tropical America, subsist largely upon foliage, which they devour in the high tree-tops, many enjoy a less monotonous fare. Small arboreal monkeys eat a variety of fruits, succulent shoots, fat insect grubs, and, now and then, the eggs or nestlings of birds. The terrestrial baboons are nourished by fruits, starchy roots, and such small creatures as they find by turning over stones and fallen logs. But none of the primates, not even the great apes, are primarily carnivorous; none is equipped by Nature for running down, pouncing upon, or otherwise capturing living prey, in the manner of the wolf, the lion, the weasel, and the hawk.

In all this great family of the primates, only one small division, that which includes our own species and such close relatives as the extinct Neanderthal man, has, it appears, ever become a hunter of warm-blooded animals for their flesh. How these bipeds, so little fitted by structure and habits for the pursuit of flying birds and fleet-footed quadrupeds, came to depend upon such animals for food is a matter about which there has been much conjecture; yet the fossil evidence hardly permits us to follow the transformation in detail. A few of its salient turns are sufficiently obvious, even if it is hardly

possible to assign to them definite dates and localities. In the first place, man's ape-like, arboreal progenitors gradually came to dwell upon the ground, either as a result of the drying and thinning of their ancestral forests, or because overcrowding in these woodlands drove some of them forth to neighboring savannas and open country. It is certain, however, that some hun-



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dreds of thousands of years ago our forebears were leading a terrestrial life, many of them far from the tropical forests, in lands where the climate was becoming more severe as the continental glaciers pushed slowly down from the arctic regions. In these circumstances there was a gradual impoverishment of the vegetation, which yielded ever less of the juicy fruits and succulent shoots that nourish the larger apes. Where the seashore did not offer an abundance of easily gathered shellfish, ancestral men had either to supplement their miscellaneous vegetable diet with the flesh of some of the larger quadrupeds and birds, or else perish. Some, at least, of them took the former course, and survived.

That Stone Age men at last became fairly proficient as hunters of large animals is proved not only by the

testimony of modern travelers who have visited surviving primitive cultures, but by the great accumulations of the bones of the bison, reindeer, wild horse, and hairy mammoth at Paleolithic camp sites in Europe. Yet this success in the chase owed little to such innate endowments as make the wolf and the tiger efficient killers. Two legs do not give the same fleetness as four; and even if quadruped prey could be caught by the biped, he lacked long, projecting fangs for severing its veins or tearing out its vital organs. Whatever success primitive man achieved as a predatory animal he owed to his dawn-



A knowledge of agriculture was a prerequisite to the attainment of a higher culture.

ing intelligence, which led him to fabricate weapons of slowly increasing efficiency, and to his chance alliance with the ancestral dog. The canine's keener nose and swifter feet helped man to track down and round up the quarry, which he dispatched with a club, a stone axe, or a flint-tipped spear. Later, when he had invented the bow and arrow, and found poison for its tip, the savage hunter could slaughter his victim from a greater distance.

The expedient of hunting large animals enabled man to survive the severe conditions of the Ice Age in the north, and in many parts of the world to pass over a difficult stage in his long march from a gatherer of wild fruits and roots to a cultivator of food plants. So long as he subsisted primarily upon the flesh of hunted animals, and such miscellaneous vegetable products as he could find in the woods and meadows, man remained a savage whose life was, as Hobbes said long ago, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Except where the sea affords more abundant sources of food, the primitive hunter and food-gatherer requires so great an area for his support that even within the more bountiful tropics it takes a square mile or more of land to support a single individual. Men so scattered, depending upon a fluctuating and uncertain food supply, never succeed in developing their latent capacities, in raising their art or religion above their crude rudiments, or in cultivating letters, science, or philosophy. They live in small groups, constantly at enmity with each other, in fear of their neighbors and a thousand perils real or fancied, and commit the most shocking deeds under the influence of the violent, ungovernable passions of the savage.

Only after they somehow learned to cultivate grains and other vegetables did our ancestors enjoy that relief from constant servitude to their daily needs which is the indispensable prerequisite to all higher culture. A large share of this gradually acquired leisure was no doubt taken up with occupations we can hardly approve: with waging wars for the capture of women, slaves and

trophies, with savage feasts and barbarous displays of superfluous luxuries, with scheming by the powerful and astute to reduce to serfdom their milder and more industrious neighbors. But, here and there, a man of finer fiber employed his time in attempting to copy the beautiful forms of Nature, in composing poetry and, later, prose; in striving to bring greater harmony into life, in pondering the enigmas of existence, or in seeking to approach the source of his being. Thus were born art, literature, ethics, philosophy, religion—pursuits that can scarcely be cultivated, and certainly can never be carried to a high level, without the leisure, the relative security, and the settled life that agriculture brought to men.

Today, a negligible proportion of mankind, comprising the most backward races in the least accessible regions, depend wholly or even largely for food upon the herbs and fruits they find in the wilderness, and the free animals they shoot or ensnare. Although the sea continues to yield, as a free bounty, an important contribution to man's diet, the terrestrial foods that keep us alive are produced almost wholly by human effort, chiefly on the farms. When computed as pounds of flesh, the hunters' annual kill of free birds and quadrupeds in a country like the United States makes an impressive total; yet this is a trifling contribution to the national economy. Few, indeed, are the people who would starve, or even lose weight, without the meat of these slaughtered animals. As a means of procuring food, the hunting of animals has become obsolete. As we view in retrospect the long history of the human stock, we see clearly that it was a temporary expedient to meet a particular crisis—a make-shift that was tried and abandoned because it failed to permit mankind to cultivate its special capacities, and rise above the level of the savage.

Although the chase of free animals failed in its primary and obvious purpose of providing food for a growing population, hunting has not for that reason been

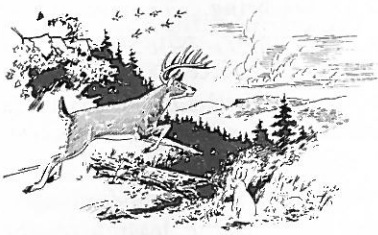


"Hunting as a pastime. . . reveals a deplorable poverty of imagination."

abandoned as a pursuit that we have outgrown, like head-hunting, human and animal sacrifices, bloody fertility rites, slavery, the exposure of unwanted infants, the ritual or ornamental mutilation of the body, and similar practices, widespread at an earlier stage of human development, that fill us with horror or disgust. On the contrary, there has been of late a steady increase in the number of hunters in some of the industrially

most advanced countries; vast sums are spent on arms, ammunition, and accessory equipment, a voluminous output of books and periodicals stimulates the hunters' zeal, and governments maintain at great expense elabor-

ate technical services for the purpose of providing a continuing abundance of living targets for the hunters' guns. No one seriously contends that the object of all this huge expenditure and effort is the procuring of necessary food. Among all but the most primitive of existing peoples, hunting is carried on largely or wholly as an amusement, or form of recreation. The problem



A photographic record of an excursion makes a fitting trophy.

we must examine today is whether this pursuit, which failed in its primary purpose of supporting human communities, satisfactorily fills its secondary, or derived purpose, of providing wholesome recreation.

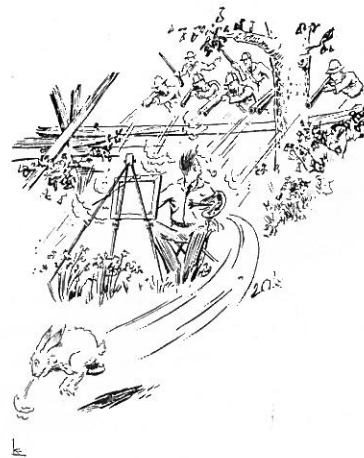
We may begin this appraisal by admitting at once that it is beneficial to those who dwell in crowded cities, or engage in sedentary occupations anywhere, to sally forth from time to time to the open country, to the fields and woods and waters. Such periodic excursions provide wholesome exercise, and afford relief from the nervous strain of continuous contact with others of our kind in a society tense with haste and fear. The question is whether, when dedicated to violent and bloody pursuits, these visits to the natural world do not lose much of their potential value, perhaps injuring the spirit even if they benefit the body.

The least of the counts against hunting as a pastime is that it reveals a deplorable poverty of imagination. Men so steeped in acquisitiveness and unremitting purpose as we moderns can scarcely cast off our purposeful attitude in our hours of leisure; even when we go forth from our workshops and offices avowedly for recreation, we must go in pursuit of something, and often of something tangible that we can carry home. This is certainly our misfortune, yet I suppose we must accept and make the best of it. But can we find no more fitting trophy of our wanderings over hill and vale, our tramps through the peaceful countryside, than the limp and bloody carcass of some animal we have slaughtered? A photographic record of our excursion, such as anyone might make with modern equipment, would be more adequate and permanent. Sketches by our own hand would be still more precious to us, for we pour more of ourselves into them, interfusing our personality with the scene or object that we interpret as we copy. The treasures of knowledge that a little patience in the observation of living things can uncover, the deeper understanding that may be ours if we go to Nature in a mood of quiet contemplation, are rewards of inestimable value. But if we must bring back some material token of our outing, a pine-cone, or a dry fruit that reveals curious adaptations for dispersal, a shapely or glittering pebble from the bed of a stream, a cocoon to hang at the window until the slumbering insect emerges and flies away,

are fitter and more enduring mementoes than a putrefying carcass. But it requires some imagination to think of these things.

Moreover, the huntsman is blind to his own most pressing necessity, which is to calm a mind vexed by the thousand petty cares of life, to permit the free expansion of a spirit pinched by our habitual concentration upon ourselves, our problems, and our needs. But the sweet repose of Nature, the calm thoughts it is capable of engendering, are lost to the mind intent upon destruction. To shatter the quiet peace of woodland and marsh with the loud explosions of shells, that bring panic to all their more alert inhabitants, reveals a pathetic lack of appreciation of the fitness of things. Not only do we make it impossible for the natural world to yield us the healing balm we so urgently require, we ruin its charm for every sensitive mind within sight and hearing. One who goes forth to enjoy the mellow autumn days of northern lands, when after the bustle of summer activity plants and animals are preparing for winter's long repose, too often finds the lovely countryside a pandemonium of gunfire, and may hurry back to his stuffy apartment or office amidst the city's less ominous din.

Worst of all, the slaughter of animals for pleasure prevents the growth of imaginative sympathy, and blunts all the finer sensibilities of the human mind. Hunting is often defended by the "sportsman" on the ground that Nature is "cruel," that animals of all sorts kill other weaker animals for food, and that, in making such use of other creatures as we will and can, we are merely following the example of Nature. But those who advance this argument overlook, willfully or carelessly, the fact that slaughter at long range by mechanical weapons, often in unskilled hands, causes more suffering than killing by direct contact with organic weapons, as



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in practically all predatory animals. A large proportion of the birds and mammals struck by the hunter's bullets are not killed but, more or less severely wounded, manage to escape their persecutor to die slowly of festering lesions or starvation, or perhaps to live for months as pitiful cripples, bearing pellets of lead in their flesh.

Although not assessable by us, the amount of pain they endure is in all probability very great. One with a modicum of imaginative sympathy would place on one side of the reckoning the long-continued agony of these less fortunate victims of his gun, on the other his brief pleasure in the chase, and find that the first so far out-



weighs the second that without further argument it vetoes his indulgence in this coarse amusement. To persist in an occupation whose adverse consequences to other living things are so immeasurably greater than their benefits to self reveals a lamentable deficiency of that feeling for fairness and proportion which is the very foundation of the moral life. It is to act in utter disregard of the Golden Rule.

Even leaving aside the consideration of pain, which can be known in its full intensity only in our individual selves, the thought that a form of such beauty and grace, an organism of such abundant vitality, as a wild bird or a woodland quadruped, should, through our agency, and for no purpose save our transient pleasure, be suddenly transmuted into a carcass—or even worse, a starving cripple bereft of strength and lustre—would distress a mind sensitive to all the implications of life. The ethically awakened man is careful not only to avoid the infliction of needless suffering upon any creature, but is concerned for the preservation of form as such, and especially for those intricate and splendid forms that are the product of eons of evolution. He recalls that, whatever else he may himself be, he is demonstrably a complex form, and upon the preservation of such form his being depends. And, further, such a spiritually awakened man would become ashamed of the fierce, destructive passions to which he gave free play in the pursuit of living victims, disturbed that he ever found

gratification in this baser component of his nature.

When we take the long view of the role that the hunting of free animals has played in the whole evolution of mankind, we can be sure that if our species continues its onward march and does not, as some fear, degenerate in an orgy of destructive fury, this bloody pursuit will become as obsolete as a form of recreation as it long ago became as a method of procuring food. As men grow in spiritual stature, they will not fail to see that this activity, which failed in its primary purpose of supporting growing human communities, fails even more tragically in its secondary purpose of furnishing recreation for men who without it have ample means of subsistence. As a mode of procuring food, it did at least meet a pressing need, and helped tide the human stock over a difficult period of transition. But as a form of amusement for modern, agricultural man, hunting fills no need. He has countless superior forms of recreation, more beneficial to body and spirit; and the continuance of this outgrown pursuit serves only to retard the flowering of the finer elements of our nature at the same time that it keeps alive those base and savage passions which the good and the wise have ever striven to subdue. That a pursuit which hard necessity forced upon an ape that had somehow deserted the trees for the ground, should ever become a pastime worthy of a rational and moral being, is so intrinsically improbable that we could expect no other conclusion.

