



FILMING BIRDS IN SIERRA LEONE: Charles Lagus, a member of the recent B.B.C. and Zoological Society Expedition, is seen using a native shelter as a hide for filming the bird-life of the territory. These primitive buildings are erected by natives to shelter bird-scarers. The expedition spent ten weeks in Sierra Leone, collecting specimens for the Zoo and making recordings and films of the animal and native life. The members were Mr. J. Lester, the Zoological Society's Curator of Reptiles; Head Keeper Mr. A. Woods; Mr. Charles Lagus, and Mr. David Attenborough, who has written the following account of the journey.

ON SAFARI WITH A CAMERA IN WEST AFRICA

*An Account of the Recent Zoological Society and B.B.C.
Combined Expedition to Sierra Leone*

By DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

THE thick forests of Sierra Leone shelter a bird which until only a few weeks ago had never been exhibited in captivity and which only about four or five Europeans had seen in its wild state. The capture of this bird, *Picathartes gymnocephalus*, was the primary aim of the recent expedition to Sierra Leone sponsored jointly by the Zoological Society of London and the B.B.C. Television Service.

We had good hopes of finding it, for Mr. Jack Lester, Curator of the London Zoo's Reptile House, and leader of the expedition, had caught a glimpse of it three years ago when he was collecting monkeys for medical research in the Protectorate. It is a most bizarre bird, the size of a crow, and almost totally lacking in feathers on its head, which one might think would give it a rather unpleasant vulturine appearance. This, however, is not the case. Its head is coloured a delicate shade of lemon-yellow, with two black patches over the ears. These features, it has been said, make it look rather like an old lady in a bathing cap.

There were four of us on the expedition: Jack Lester, who was the leader; Head Keeper Alfred Woods, of the Zoo's Bird House, whose difficult task it was to remain at base most of the time and coax each newly-captured creature to feed in captivity; Charles Lagus, our cameraman, who had recently returned from the Everest Abominable Snowman expedition; and myself, who went to direct the film and make sound recordings.

Our attention was not entirely restricted to *Picathartes*. The Zoo wanted many other inhabitants of the West African forest and we hoped to photograph some of the smaller creatures, particularly insects, which have rarely, if ever, been filmed before. We felt that since we had only ten weeks in Africa, we could not hope to rival the many spectacular and remarkable films which had been taken over the past thirty years of the larger and more famous East African animals, such as the lions and elephant, giraffe and rhinoceros, which have made such impressive appearances on the cinema screen lately. We

therefore tried to bring back something new out of Africa by concentrating on the smaller creatures. Superficially they may not be impressive, but they can be strange, sinister and terrifying in close-up.

The expedition was based on the headquarters of the Agricultural Department at Njala, in the South-Western province. From there we made treks to all parts of the Protectorate, mostly by a lorry which during the ten weeks took us some 3,000 miles. Up

in the north, near the French Guinea border, the bush thins to a savannah and there we located the Emerald Starling, possibly the most beautiful of all the African glossy starlings and a bird which, like *Picathartes*, had never been seen in captivity. They spend most of their time in flocks perching in tree-tops, rarely visiting the ground, and this habit made their capture exceedingly difficult.

However, with the aid and advice of the African villagers, the birds were attracted to the ground by spreading termites dug from their nests. They came down in flocks to feed and there became caught in the traditional African snares. In this way we collected over thirty individuals, nearly all of which settled down very rapidly in captivity and are now making a most impressive display as a small flock in one of the larger cages of the Zoo's Bird House.

Charles Lagus and I became fascinated by the many different kinds of ants which swarmed wherever we went. Perhaps the most dramatic of these are the driver ants which march in columns miles long, devouring every living thing in their path and leaving behind them a wake of skeletons picked clean. In spite of posting a watchman every night, our collections were twice invaded by columns of these ferocious insects and as a result we lost a number of valuable snakes which, unable to escape, had been bitten to death. Filming these ants was apt to be something of a painful business, as they have an unhappy tendency to crawl up trousers and bite hard. The only course to be taken is to run, stripping off your clothes as you go. However, we eventually found that they were unable to crawl up greased rubber boots, and Charles Lagus could stand in the middle of a drive getting most dramatic film shots, while I squatted by his side brushing off the ants as they ran up the legs of the camera tripod.

I carried with me wherever we went a small battery-driven tape recorder. In addition to recording animal noises I took the opportunity of bringing back on tape

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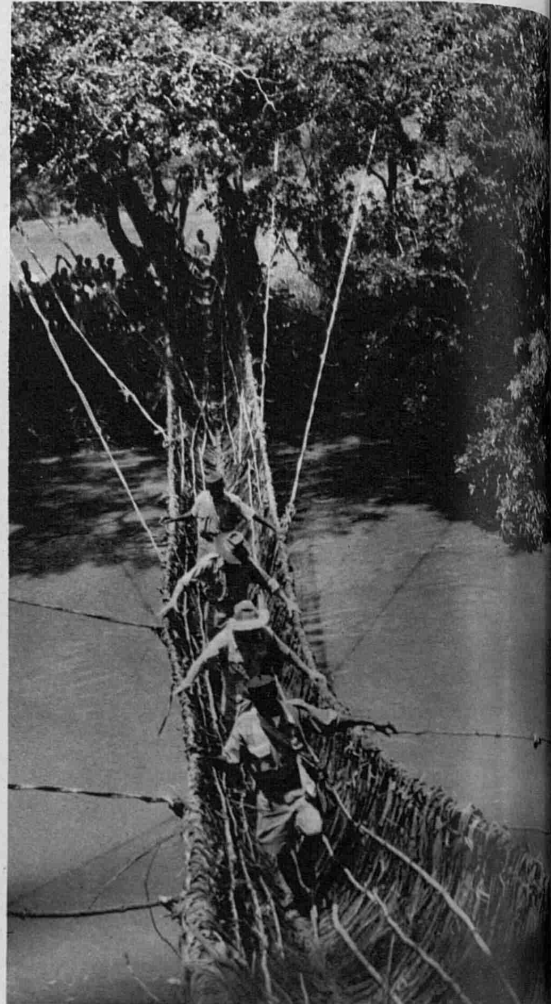


THE YELLOW-HEADED PICATHARTES WHOSE CAPTURE WAS ONE OF THE PRIMARY AIMS OF THE EXPEDITION: This is the only specimen of *Picathartes* in captivity. It was reared in Sierra Leone by Keeper Woods, who successfully brought it to London.

ON SAFARI WITH A CAMERA



THE BAMBOO FOREST OF SIERRA LEONE: This thicket was between 50 and 60 ft. high and quite impenetrable. Members of the expedition frequently found their paths blocked by these thickets.



A RICKETY HAMMOCK-BRIDGE: Two members of the expedition and African guides cross a bridge made of creepers. They are watched by a crowd of natives, who can be seen on the far bank.



On left— AN ANNOYING EXPERIENCE: The expedition's lorry stuck in the mud. This happened four or five times during the ten weeks in the Protectorate, as the only roads available were mud tracks which often proved treacherous. On this occasion the lorry was stuck for about two hours.

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a great deal of African music. There is a much wider variety of traditional music in Sierra Leone than I had thought. Drumming of the greatest complexity is found all over the country. In the north part every village has its balange player, his instrument being a primitive xylophone with hollow calabashes slung beneath the keys to act as resonators.

These instrumentalists were, to me, most impressive. Having recorded one of their pieces I would play it back to the musicians with the most gratifying results. The expressions on their faces always followed the same sequence. First blank astonishment, then an enormous peal of laughter and finally deep absorption and concentration, accompanied by nods as one particularly difficult and complicated phrase was recorded to their satisfaction. There was also another result which followed without fail; that of demanding that they would now play an even better and more complicated piece which I should record and take back and play to the Queen. Indeed, after the first few of these recording sessions I began to wonder how soon I should run out of tapes.

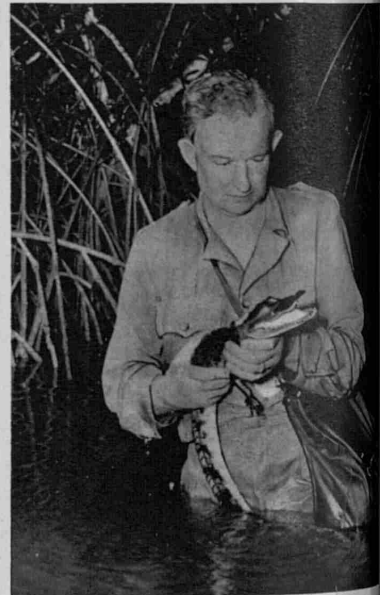
At last we discovered a nesting-site of *Picathartes* near the little village of Mandu, about eighty miles from the coast. Here on top of the hills are enormous granite boulders over a hundred feet high submerged in the thick, secondary bush. These strange birds build their cup-shaped mud-nests, rather like a very large swift's nest, on the side of these boulders. It was not at all easy to persuade the Africans to lead us to the site and to carry all our photographic and recording equipment.

Apparently they believed that the boulder is the home of one of the forest devils, a particularly large and fierce one, much taller than a man, very stout, with one leg and one eye. The birds living on the side of his home were his guardians and servants, and anyone who interfered with them would incur the wrath of the devil, with hideous but unspecified results. This tale may have been exaggerated for our benefit in order that the price for carrying loads up to the site should be increased. If it was, it was a widespread ruse, for we came across it wherever we heard rumours of the bird.

We built a hide near the site and spent many hours in it watching this handsome creature and enjoying the thrill and excitement of knowing that we were the first Europeans ever to see it on its nest. Filming was extremely difficult because of the lack of light, but by judicious pruning of the trees by the side of the rock and by using a very sensitive film, we finally succeeded in obtaining a long series of shots. We were also lucky



DAVID ATTENBOROUGH WALKS A BARELY VISIBLE PATH: The author of this article is seen in the bush near the nesting-place of the bird *Picathartes*. Mr. Attenborough is a B.B.C. television producer at Lime Grove Studios.



LUXURY WAS NOT THE KEYNOTE OF THE EXPEDITION: Mr. J. Lester, Curator of Reptiles to the Zoological Society, is seen in a mangrove swamp at Mandu, holding a small crocodile which he has just captured.

enough to obtain recordings of the bird by concealing a microphone in a mushroom-shaped termite hill upon which the adults habitually perched before flying to the nest. Their call is a most extraordinary guttural grunt which at first we could not believe was coming from the bird.

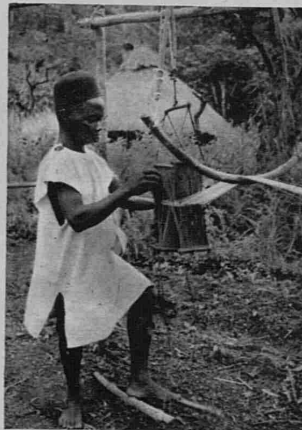
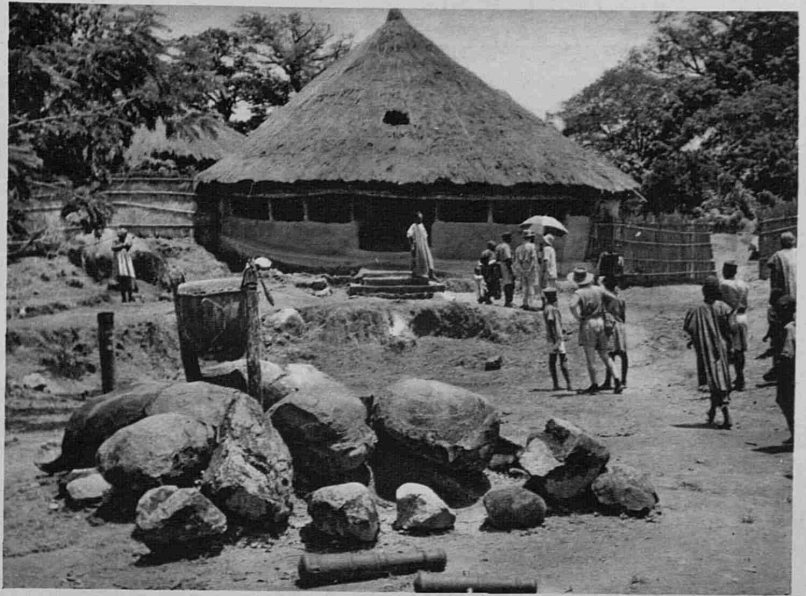
Two adults and a chick were finally captured by netting them as they roosted on their nests at night. The first stage towards success was thus achieved, but the second, and perhaps even more difficult task, still lay ahead—that of persuading the birds to feed in captivity and bringing them home alive. Unfortunately the chick alone survived. For the first few days we had it, its health seemed slowly to decline and at the end of a week we had almost despaired of rearing it.

Then, almost by accident, we discovered that it had a taste for small frogs. With great excitement we set

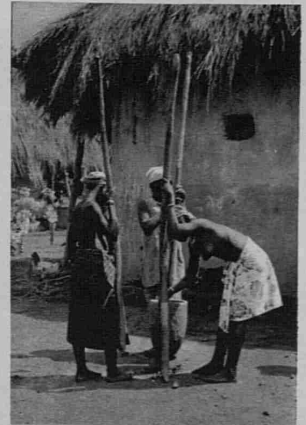
about the task of catching large numbers of these creatures, and since it ate fifteen or twenty at a time and had to be fed four or five times a day, the supply of the neighbourhood at the end of the expedition began to get rather sparse. I for one would have welcomed a change in the animal's tastes, if only that I could stop looking for frogs and catch something else. This diet continued for almost a month. Mr. Woods managed to wean it from frogs and persuade it to take other substitute foods which were available on the long voyage home. At the end of the expedition, in addition to the *Picathartes*, we had a collection of over 300 birds, about fifty mammals, including mongoose, squirrel, rats, a monkey and a chimpanzee, as well as numerous reptiles. These are all now safely back at the museum. After settling down and passing through quarantine they will soon be on exhibition.



WONDERFUL SCENERY IN THE FORESTS : Mr. Charles Lagus filming primitive log-bridge in the Northern Province. Below—Filming river ants, which on this occasion were on the march and harmless.



A VISIT TO THE PARAMOUNT CHIEF OF MUSAIA, IN THE NORTHERN PROVINCE : In the background is the chief's hut and nearer the camera is a drum used for calling assemblies, and some old cannon.



On left—WEAVING CLOTH NEAR BAFODIA : A native boy using a primitive loom to weave country cloth.

On right—WOMEN POUNDING CASSAVA : This picture was taken in the village of Bafodia.



HAZARDOUS CROSSING : These hammock-bridges are made of lianas, a type of woody climbing plant, and have to be renewed each year as they are swept away in the rainy season by the swollen rivers. In addition to the bird *Picathartes*, the expedition brought back many other animals in a collection comprising about 300 birds and fifty mammals, ranging from apes to mongoose. These are now at the London Zoo. It is hoped that more expeditions of this type will be made in the future.