

# DISAPPEARANCE OF BIG GAME IN NORTHERN KENYA

## THE AUTHOR



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**H**eat rises off the cracked, salt-encrusted plains. Small, dispersed herds of dust-devils wander leisurely away in the distance over the barren flats. In the middle of the Chalbi desert, standing on the bonnet of my Land Rover, I can see only a dual line of tyre tracks leading to the horizon in front and in back of me. There is not a cloud in the pale blue sky and a tremendous wind blows incessantly out of the south east, heading for Lake Turkana, about a hundred kilometres away.



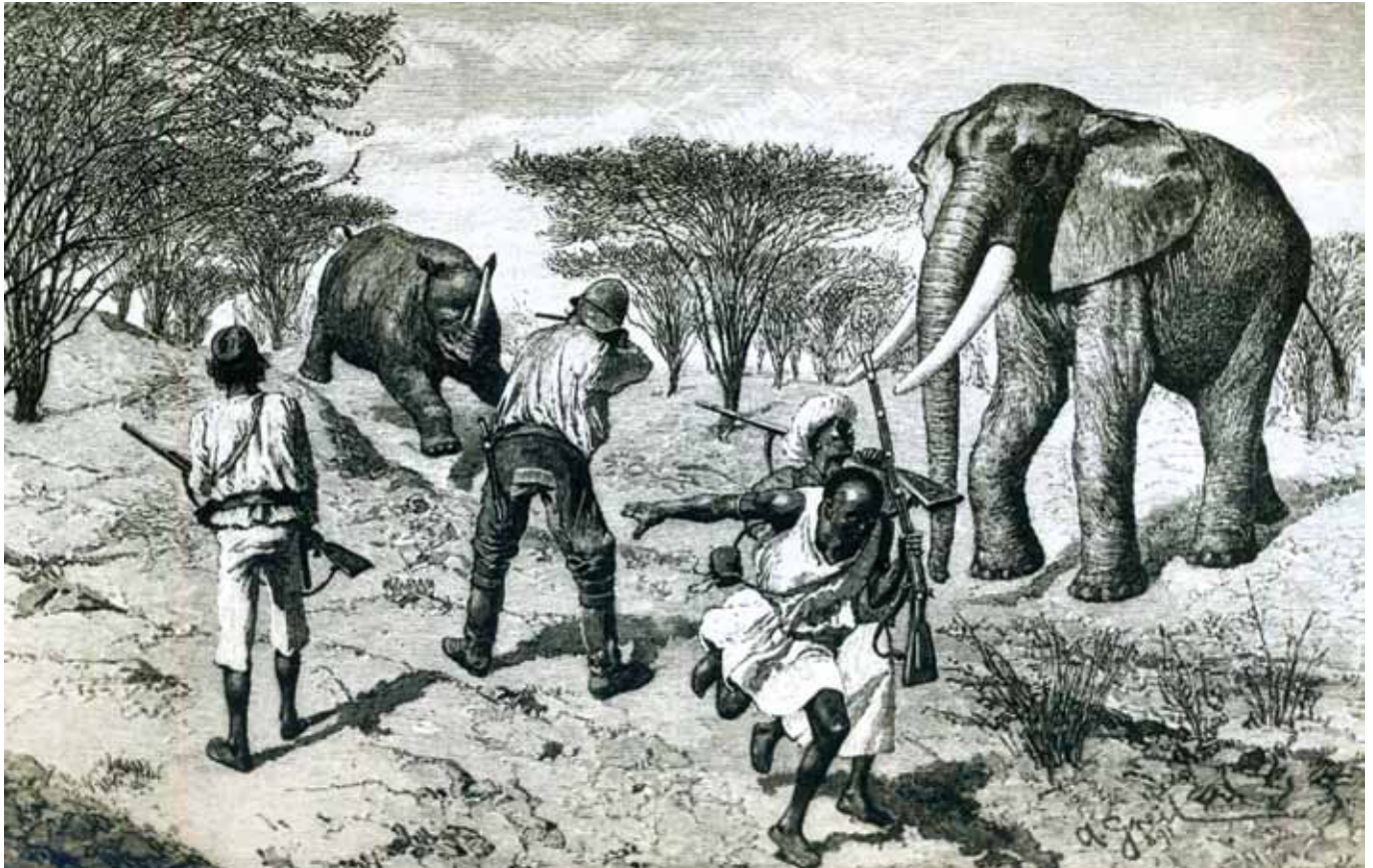
Grevy's zebra are still found in small numbers around the Huri Hills.

PHOTO BY: DAN STILES

The monotony and sense of infinite distance are broken by glances to either side, where the Chalbi is bounded on the east by a perpendicular wall of lava, marking the abrupt end of the volcanic rock-strewn plain descending from the Huri Hills. These pyramidal peaks are etched on the north eastern horizon, near the Ethiopian border. In places below the lava escarpment bright green rows and orchards of doum palms cluster where subterranean runoff waters from Mt. Kulal and the Chari Ashe Hills to the west bubble to the surface, attracting herds of camels and small stock tended by Gabbra pastoralists.

Mt. Kulal, about 30 kms to the west, rises 1,800 metres above the Chalbi, itself between 400 and 500 metres above sea level. The purple mountain is often veiled by a grey mist of wind

borne grit, but on clear days it can be seen forming a massive north–south barrier between the Chalbi and Lake Turkana. Further north, the Chalbi takes a swing to the west around the northern end of the Chari Ashe Hills, and then one reaches North Horr, a motley scattering of Gabbra huts, dukas, government administration buildings, a police post and a Catholic mission. North Horr marks the northern extension of the Chalbi, but the flats continue for a few kilometres to the east, where they begin to interfinger with scrub vegetation and sediments laid down by erosion from higher land to the east. The land is dominated by annual grasses, shrubs and Acacia thorn trees, though there are localized patches of other species, adapted to the meager and highly variable 500 mm average annual rainfall.



When Von Höhnel and Teleki travelled through the area east of Lake Turkana in 1888, elephant and rhino seemed to be charging at them from behind every bush.

Continuing west from North Horr one runs into very rough terrain made up of numerous low ridges dissected by gullies, covered with thorn scrub vegetation, until the Turkana lake shore is reached, which is mainly flat with salt-tolerant grass. In all of this vast territory, measuring about 37,000 km<sup>2</sup> (the size of Switzerland), no big game would be seen today. The most wildlife lovers could hope for would be a few zebra, oryx, Grant's gazelle, gerenuk, dik dik and, along the northern shoreline, a subspecies of topi known as the Tiang. The scene would have been very different in the past. Archaeological sites, some of which I worked on in the 1970s and 1980s, show that from over two million years ago up to the middle of the last century the area supported a typical savannah fauna, including elephant, rhino, buffalo, giraffe, and a

wide range of antelopes, gazelles and carnivores.

In 1888, Lt. Von Höhnel, accompanying Count Teleki, the man who named Lake Rudolf (now Lake Turkana), described wildlife encountered along the eastern lakeshore and inland: 'There was a good deal of game in the neighbourhood, including zebras, Beisa antelopes, and gazelles; and we also caught sight of herds of buffalos ... The latter part of this short stage was through a district rendered extremely interesting by the number of elephants in it, several of which fell victims to our guns.... I hastened on and came upon the vanguard halting near the first elephant brought down by the Count, which lay in the open and was the biggest animal we had yet come across, its tusks, which were of equal length, weighing some 228 lb. They had,

however, seen plenty of game, including numerous elephants, one a giant with tusks longer than any we had yet seen. Rhinos were also very numerous, and it was a favourite animal to hunt for the pot.

Ivory hunters Donaldson Smith and Arthur Neumann traversed the area a few years later and also reported rich game, including numerous elephants and rhinos, even right on the lake shore.

Today there is not a single elephant, rhino or buffalo anywhere in the area, except for elephant and buffalo on Mt. Marsabit. The most tragic possibility, little known even to zoologists, is that a unique variety of rhino may have been shot into extinction in northern Kenya. Von Höhnel described a rhino different from ones seen elsewhere, much smaller and with different shaped horns. He believed it to be a unique type of black

Ludwig Von Höhnel, 1894, *Discovery of Lakes Rudolf and Stephanie*. London, Longmans, Green and Co.



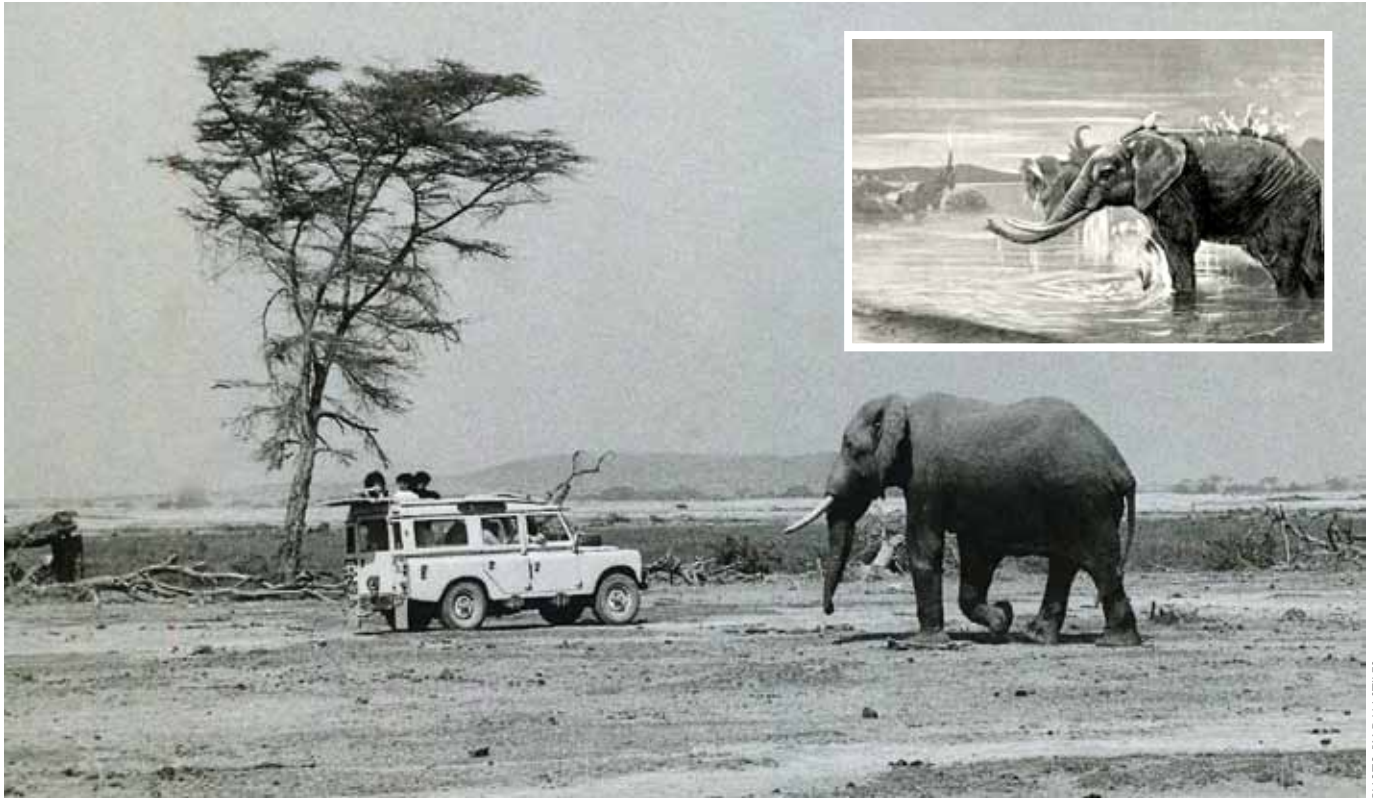


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**Top:** Occasionally an elephant wanders off into the lowlands from Mt Marsabit, as here in 1982, but it is a rare event.

**Insert:** In 1895 Arthur Neumann saw elephants bathing in Lake Turkana.

**Below:** Beisa oryx, once common in the far north, are few and far between these days.

rhino. Neumann substantiated Von Höhnel's claims, and measured both male and female rhinos significantly smaller than those seen elsewhere.

**Why has the big game disappeared?**

If we take 1888 as the starting point, it is clear that the land supported abundant wildlife. The local Gabbra, Rendille and Samburu did not normally hunt wild animals, with most species being culturally proscribed as

food. However, extraordinary times foster unusual behaviour. In the late 1880s, bovine pleuro-pneumonia and rinderpest swept through East Africa, decimating herds of cattle. The Samburu were particularly hard hit, and those with any cattle left retired to the highlands of Mts. Kulal, Nyiro, the Ndotos and Maralal. Those with no subsistence herds became Dorobo, that is they took up hunting and gathering. I think buffalo were hard hit as well,

both as a source of food ('wild cattle') and because they were susceptible to the cattle diseases.

The Gabbra and Boran were also badly affected. Being armed with firearms from Ethiopia, one of the easiest ways to rebuild herds was to kill elephants and rhinos and exchange the tusks and horns with Somali and Arab traders for cattle and small stock. One good pair of tusks could fetch 30 cows. A main trading entrepôt was at Lugh, in Somalia, where ivory could be taken down the Juba River to Kismayu to be shipped overseas. I met Gabbra in 1979-82 who could point to animals that were 'elephant' cattle – descendants of cows bought with tusks.

During the late 1880s and early 1890s hunting of elephants and rhinos by pastoralists began on a large scale, mainly as a strategy to rebuild herds.



PHOTO BY: DAN STILES

**Top:** Gerenuk, the 'giraffe-necked' gazelle, are common in *Acacia mellifera* thickets.  
**Bottom:** The Author interviewing some of the villagers

During this same period Swahilis from Mombasa opened up a trade route to northern Kenya via Meru and Marsabit. Some of the famous 19th century ivory hunters used it, which added to the jumbo onslaught.

In 1896 and 1897 Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia began sending his armies south into Oromo (Boran and Gabbra) regions to expand his empire and gather cattle, as the Amhara and Tigre herds had been greatly reduced by the epizootics as well. More and more Oromo entered the old North Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya, forcing Samburu and Rendille



The following are comments written by colonial administrators in northern Kenya:

- 1916 – Game plentiful around Kalacha and signs of buffalo.
- 1921 – Kulal area – Ethiopians have almost cleared the area of elephants; survivors found in South Horr valley Ndoto Mountains.
- 1922 – Kulal to North Horr – extensive hunting parties from Ethiopia, their destruction amongst the game in the last few years has been tremendous. Herds of elephants have been wiped out and places where rhinoceros were in plenty, are now only remarkable for the complete absence of those beasts.
- 1928 – Marsabit District – rinderpest has decimated buffalo and greater kudu in district.
- 1933 – Moyale – very little game left in the district; elephant, rhino and buffalo now extinct.
- 1941 – Marsabit District – the [British] Army is shooting game in the district indiscriminantly; one officer shot seven giraffe.
- 1948 – Kulal is depressingly devoid of big game and Marsabit District does not carry half the game it should, because of war-time losses.
- 1952 – Ethiopia continues to be a ready market for rhino horn, ivory and leopard skin.
- 1953 – Moyale District – the game in the district is so small it can no longer be considered as a source of supply.

south. The early 20th century was a time of instability in the NFD, as Gabbra and Boran were flooding in with the Ethiopian army raiding them.

The Oromo are not like the Samburu, Maasai and Rendille in their attitudes about hunting. They will hunt for food, profit and for cultural reasons. To kill a fierce animal such as an elephant, rhino, buffalo or lion is to prove manhood, and there are ceremonies that celebrate it. If the tusks, horn or skins can be sold, all the better.

In 1916, buffalo were around Kalacha, a settlement on the eastern margin of the Chalbi, a place I know well having used it often as a camp spot during my research days. Even without hunting, buffalo could not survive in the barren area today, grass being in short supply due to overgrazing. Gabbra I worked with recognized that the number of trees had diminished significantly during their lifetimes, and areas where giraffe were plentiful no longer have

them, as the trees to feed them are gone. Giraffe are also hunted traditionally by the Oromo, mainly for the skin of their stomachs (*yabu*), used to make buckets (*okhole*) utilised traditionally in wells and for milking cows. Oromo are now switching to plastic, as giraffes are gone.

Through a combination of hunting, land degradation and disease over the past 125 years, large herbivores have been eradicated from the lowland areas of the far north of Kenya. The point of this article is that the loss of big game – elephants and rhino in particular – due to hunting and habitat loss, is nothing new in Kenya and most of Africa. Destitute pastoralists from the Sudan, Somalia and Kenya are the main actors in both today in East and Central Africa. The infamous Sudanese 'Janjaweed' and Somali 'Shifita' elephant poachers started out as bandits, partly because livestock no longer provided a living. I wonder if they use the proceeds to buy livestock. ●