

Wild Places of Zimbabwe By *Dick Pitman*. Bulawayo, Books of Zimbabwe, 1980, 192pp., Z\$11.30 (h/b), Z\$4.75 (p/b).

Ivory, Apes and Peacocks By *C. Emily Dibb*. Bulawayo, Books of Zimbabwe, 1981, 272pp., Z\$11.50 (h/b), Z\$4.70 (p/b).

The Valley of Tantalika By *Richard Rayner*. Bulawayo, Books of Zimbabwe, 1980, 165pp., Z\$11.50 (h/b), Z\$4.70 (p/b).

Call-of-the-marsh: Life with a Basenji By *Jill Wylie*. Bulawayo, Books of Zimbabwe, 1979, 302pp., Z\$11.50

Today's writers on African wildlife are faced with an enormous challenge. Wildlife is recognized as one of the continent's greatest assets, yet it is being destroyed at an unprecedented rate. The relentless growth of the human population, together with environmental degradation, drought and poverty, is placing many species in jeopardy and we can expect to see a number of them become extinct in the near future.

Tragically, most of Africa's inhabitants are unaware of the glory and uniqueness of its wildlife, and of how little time there is left. In Zimbabwe a whole generation is growing up without any contact with wild creatures, for many rural areas now have little or no wildlife; the National Parks are too expensive or inaccessible for the bulk of the population, whose knowledge of wildlife will come only from books. The wildlife author is faced with the problem of writing books that will kindle an interest in their subjects, without being earnest and dull on the one hand or trivial and anthropomorphic on the other.

The four books reviewed here range from the serious to the light-hearted. In a sense, they all fail to meet the objectives of stimulating a general interest in wildlife because the authors all come from a small segment of Zimbabwe's population and the experiences they relate cannot be shared by the majority. They all serve to emphasize how desperately this country needs good, Black writers on wildlife who can make people aware of their heritage and awaken a desire to save it. All of the books under review describe events and ways of life that no longer exist and this gives them a special poignancy and interest, but we still need books dealing with the contemporary problems of wildlife in this country.

Dick Pitman attempts to do this and discusses the various problems faced by the great wild areas of Zimbabwe. His book is an account of a trip to some of Zimbabwe's most spectacular and inaccessible wild areas in an unpredictable and cartankerous Land Rover. It was written in 1979, when the liberation war was drawing to a close, and the most interesting aspect is his description of the way staff of the Department of National Parks lived during those troubled times. I was a member of the Department then and I especially enjoyed reading about people and events that I knew or knew of.

His love of these wild areas comes over very well and he manages to capture the special qualities of living and working in them. The zest and enthusiasm of people doing arduous, sometimes dangerous and often ill-rewarded work is well-described. The time that the author writes of could be considered a high-water mark in the history of wildlife management in Zimbabwe because the

relative isolation that the country had been in prior to this meant that we had not been fully exposed to the problems affecting wildlife elsewhere in Africa.

Dick Pitman discusses these problems in some depth and gives graphic descriptions of the effects of poaching. This discussion seems a little naïve now, in view of the ferocity of the poaching campaign against our wildlife that is now taking place. At the time this book was written it seemed impossible that our black rhinoceros population could be decimated as it has been. If the spirit of resourcefulness that is described in the book still exists, then there is some hope.

C. Emily Dibb is the daughter of one of Zimbabwe's earliest wildlife photographers and her book describes an enchanted childhood on a rambling property on the outskirts of Bulawayo, surrounded by domestic and wild animals of all kinds. I read the book with nostalgia since I grew up in a similar environment in the Matopos and knew many of the people she writes about. This nostalgia was combined with sadness though, because few children today will be able to share these experiences.

She has a gift of characterization of people and animals and her description of the Toppies' evening chorus is one of the best I have read. Perhaps adults always seem larger than life but her book contains accounts of many seemingly eccentric people — which is how I remember the Bulawayo of my youth. I especially enjoyed the story of the filming expedition to Gorongosa for it summarizes the difficulties and excitement of doing things only a few years ago, things that now seem easy. Travelling by car — and there are some nice car stories in this book — symbolizes for me how tamed Zimbabwe has become: and how it is the duller for it.

In *The Valley of Tantalika*, Richard Rayner has written a story about the hand of man as seen through the eyes of the animals, in particular Tantalika the otter and a small group of impala. I find such books too improbable to be able to enjoy them and it is certainly difficult to write a good book in this vein. Nevertheless, Rayner has written a rather moving story which draws attention to the plight of the animals when man decides to take a hand in their world. If such a book can remind people that all development schemes involve the destruction of natural habitats it will have served a valuable purpose.

I am not sure what it takes to write a good book about a dog; I think high adventure, hard men, hard dogs and a harsh environment are essential ingredients. *Call-of-the-marsh* is a story of a Basenji, no doubt an unusual dog, which was the author's pet for some thirteen years. The book includes some vignettes of country life in Zimbabwe during the 1960s and of encounters with wild animals, but I soon tired of *Call-of-the-marsh* (for such was the dog's name). Surely Jock of the Bushveld or White Fang never had to worry about such 'ho-hum' things as being dosed for worms? This book is written in the form of a diary which I found irritating at first, infuriating somewhat later, and it ultimately ruined the book for me. If it had been written in a narrative style with less attention to daily trivia it would have been a much better book.