

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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DROUGHT AND WILD ANIMALS

Thousands of American sportsmen have done less shooting than usual this year because of Congressional action last summer curtailing the season for killing wild fowl, as a partial offset to the disastrous effects of the great drought of 1930-31 on bird life. It is therefore timely to remark that in this respect, as in others, the drought that broke American records was a mild affair compared with what other parts of the world have sometimes experienced.

The terrible ravages wrought by drought among wild animals remain, for the most part, unrecorded, but episodes occasionally brought to the attention of the world give us an inkling of what happens to these creatures when the water supply fails. Capt. W. F. Owen, in the narrative of his African voyages, tells how the large town of Benguella, in Portuguese West Africa, was once invaded by thirsty elephants, who fought a bloody battle with the inhabitants for possession of the wells.

Darwin, in his "Naturalist's Voyage," paints a vivid picture of the effects of the "gran seco" of 1827-30 in Argentina on both wild and domestic animals. In the province of Buenos Aires alone fully a million head of cattle perished. "I was informed by an eye-witness," he says, "that the cattle in herds of thousands rushed into the Parana and, being exhausted by hunger, they were unable to crawl up the muddy banks, and thus were drowned. The arm of the river which runs by San Pedro was so full of putrid carcasses that the master of a vessel told me that the smell rendered it quite impassable. Without doubt several hundred thousand animals thus perished in the river." All the small rivers in the vicinity became highly saline, and the wild animals that drank from them perished in vast numbers.

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