

HUNTING SHELLS ON THE COAST OF KENYA

By Jane Bailey.

OFF you go, prepared to get really grubby and damp, with an extra container for minute and breakable shells, and a knife to investigate holes in rock and sand; this will save many a sore finger.

Now what does your reef offer? If dead coral and rock abound, search all nooks and corners and turn over anything that is moveable. Small and large cowries should come to light. There are many species of these, most of which are common, but you may find a rare one or two, and these have quite a high value. Small Turbo pyramids, mother of pearl, with pink or cream bases should be here, also the red-brown Cymation, with its outer hairy covering. Above the water line on the rock face you will find the duller shells, such as Limpets, periwinkles, chitons, rock murex, oysters and barnacles; but among these varied types nice specimens can be found. Cockles and mussels love the mud between the rocks and sea, and incidentally, cockles are very thirst quenching; also bi-valves of many kinds and many of the smaller snail types of shell, though most of the latter will have lost their original owners and have been taken over by small hermit crabs. If the reef is fringed with mangrove trees, it is worth looking under the leaves for minute snails attached by sticky threads.

If mud and weed or muddy sand abound, look for the foliated murex or spindle shell, with its beautiful branching arms and slender stem. Scallops of every shade can be found, mauve, yellow, brown and bright red are the commonest. The whelk; the fig shell, which is rare and looks just like a fig; the varied scorpion shells; the elephant's tooth, which is a small slim horn; the *Cassis rufa*, or cameo shell; large cowries; spined oysters; sundial or *Architectonica* shell; hatchet cones with blue or pink interiors and cones are all to be found here.

Always investigate lumps of blackness in these parts, for so very often they prove to be lovely shells. Most of the shells in such an area have a muddy coating, especially the cones, which need scraping as soon as they are found. Don't forget that though most cones are harmless, quite a few of them have a very bad sting, and as a precaution, I pierce the animal as soon as I find it, and never put my hand on the barb which lies at the narrow end of the aperture.

Maybe in your wanderings you will find a mauve leathery growth among the flatter rock formations. This always yields good results if you lift up the flaps on the outer edge, for here many a precious specimen takes shelter.

Should you have a sandy reef, look for long snaky trails, and dig a knife's blade down at the trail end. There is generally a small hump showing where the shell has buried itself. This method has been known to produce many a beautifully marked *Thereba*, or Auger shell, also *Turrets* and *Olives* of shades of grey down to chocolate brown. *Bubble*

shells, the pure white polinices, large red mitra, a host of minute augers and small transparent shells can be obtained by this method.

Living coral is a camouflage for some of the loveliest specimens. Here you will find the harp shells, the white milk cowrie, and don't forget that the latter covers his whiteness with a black and red spotted mantle, so only a streak of the white shows. Larger cowries also love coral, and it is worth while to turn over any movable coral heads. You may find the mermaid's ear, which has the appearance of half a shell with holes drilled down its side. These help it to float and exclude a surplus of water.

Diving in deep water may produce beautiful trumpet shells or conches; the trochus, which is small in our waters; the African Green Snail, from which Kenya buttons are made; the pearly nautilus, which is very hard to get intact; and the *Cassius cornuta*, which Kenya people love as a door stop or a lamp holder.

Do not collect dead shells unless to keep as a specimen until its live counterpart can be found. Dead shells are useless from a true collector's point of view. Sunset shells and purple snails can often be collected intact from the shore on an outgoing or incoming tide, especially at Malindi. That rare shell may be awaiting you on the next rock; it did once happen to me; but the best specimens are camouflaged, and are not too difficult to find once one's eye becomes accustomed to the search.

So much for the daylight collecting; but should you wish to go further, take a pressure lamp on the beach at night. Choose a falling low tide, for then the shells are humping out of the ground to feed, and the light also attracts them. It is amazing how many can be collected, but don't forget to wear strong shoes, as the sea urchins also like to wander round, and maybe the stone fish "bevu" and young sting ray are out taking the night air.

So much for collecting, and now you have the shells at home, and they all have to be cleaned! Don't lose heart. Pack your bigger specimens in a large box full of sand, and bury the box for four or five days. When you dig it up the smell will be overpowering, but the shells' inhabitants will have almost rotted, and a good rinse in a deep sea pool should clean them of all matter. If you want to be an expert, save all the opercula, or doors on the animals, scrape them clean and return each inside its correct specimen. Whilst speaking of opercula, it is a help to lever them up from the shell and insert a piece of wood or anything handy into the meat behind, then bury them, for a closely shut shell can hold out for a week as it retains its inside moisture. The next procedure is to place the cleaned shells in a shady spot for a day or two. The ants will finish any residue left inside, and the fresh air will remove any clinging aroma. Smaller shells can be pickled in weak solutions of methylated spirit or formalin without coming to harm. Two days should be sufficient; but your cones, Terebas, and any more of a similar spiral nature, will need a long thin needle or wire inserted to grab the animal's tail, which always seems to get left behind and causes such unpleasant results.

Now that all the shells are clean, boil some diluted Hydrochloric acid, one part acid to three parts water, and dip your shells in the mixture. Beware of dropping your specimens into the acid for only a skeleton will emerge. Have beside you a bowl of fresh water, and change this if it gets dirty. Dip, look and dip again, until you are satisfied, then plunge the shell into the fresh water. Take care that the inside of the shell is kept acid free, a wad of cotton wool helps here; but it must be removed on reaching the fresh water. The acid gives a bloom to your shell, and removes the outer skin from cones. A good collector cleans one cone and keeps another of the same species intact with the skin or epidermis.

Your shells, having been dried, are now ready for show case or box. Place a small piece of cotton wool at the base of the aperture for safety's sake, and the work is done. It's been hard, and you may wonder if it has been worth while; but forget your specimens for a week, and when you look again you will be very pleased with your work. So good hunting, and above all, good cleaning.

Letter to the Editor.

FLAMINGOES.

Sir,

I am trying to collect information on Flamingoes in East Africa, and I would be grateful if I could use your Journal to appeal for any notes on these birds which your readers may like to send.

In particular I would be extremely glad to receive information on the following points :

1. The breeding of either Greater or Lesser Flamingoes in East Africa.
2. Records of numbers of Flamingoes occurring on any lakes in East Africa at any time of the year.
3. Any evidence of migration to or from or within East Africa.
I should be grateful if information could be sent direct to me.

Yours, etc.,

Sgd. M. W. Ridley,

Government House,

Nairobi, Kenya Colony.

10th March, 1953.