

The Elusive Okapi *Okapia johnstoni*

by Gordy Slack

Deep amid the tropical swamps of the Ituri Forest live some of the few remaining wild populations of the mysterious okapi. This gentle herbivore is the giraffe's closest modern relative. It was only discovered by scientists less than a decade before the 1909 launch of the Congo Expedition. Even today, the life history and daily habits of the animal are little understood. But in the first decade of the century, the okapi occupied an almost unicorn-like place in the popular imagination. With a tongue long enough to lick its own eyes, hind flanks striped like those of a zebra, and hearing so finely honed that it could sense and elude approaching hunters with extraordinary skill, the okapi epitomized the Congo's biological wonders.

Native Africans had probably been tracking and hunting okapi for thousands of years, but it was not until 1890 that the American explorer and writer Henry Morton Stanley sent the first reports about the animal to the Western world. These early accounts suggested that the okapi was some kind of African donkey that fed on leaves.

In 1901, explorer and colonial administrator Sir Harry Johnston, then High Commissioner of Uganda, took on the search for okapi in the hope of adding a new member to the roster of mammals--perhaps the highest accomplishment for a naturalist. Johnson was able to get a few pieces of an okapi's striped hide from natives and he sent the skins to the British Museum, where London scientists prematurely announced the discovery of a new species of zebra.

In search of a complete specimen, Johnston organized an expedition into the Ituri Forest, assisted by a company of Pygmies. At one point, when he came upon some okapi tracks and found them to be cloven, he thought the animal must be some kind of forest eland. But when he finally got a complete skeleton and skin it was immediately clear that "far from being a horse or an antelope, as expected, it claimed as its nearest relative the giraffe," wrote Herbert Lang. "It was one of the survivors of the giraffine group, such as the *Paleotragus* and *Helladotherium*, flourishing in southern Asia and Europe during Miocene ages, several million years ago. The okapi had found a safe retreat in the heart of Africa, in the gloom of the Congo forests."

Johnston's dream of credit for the discovery was realized, and the scientific name assigned to the okapi by P.L. Slater retains Johnston's moniker: *Okapia johnstoni*.

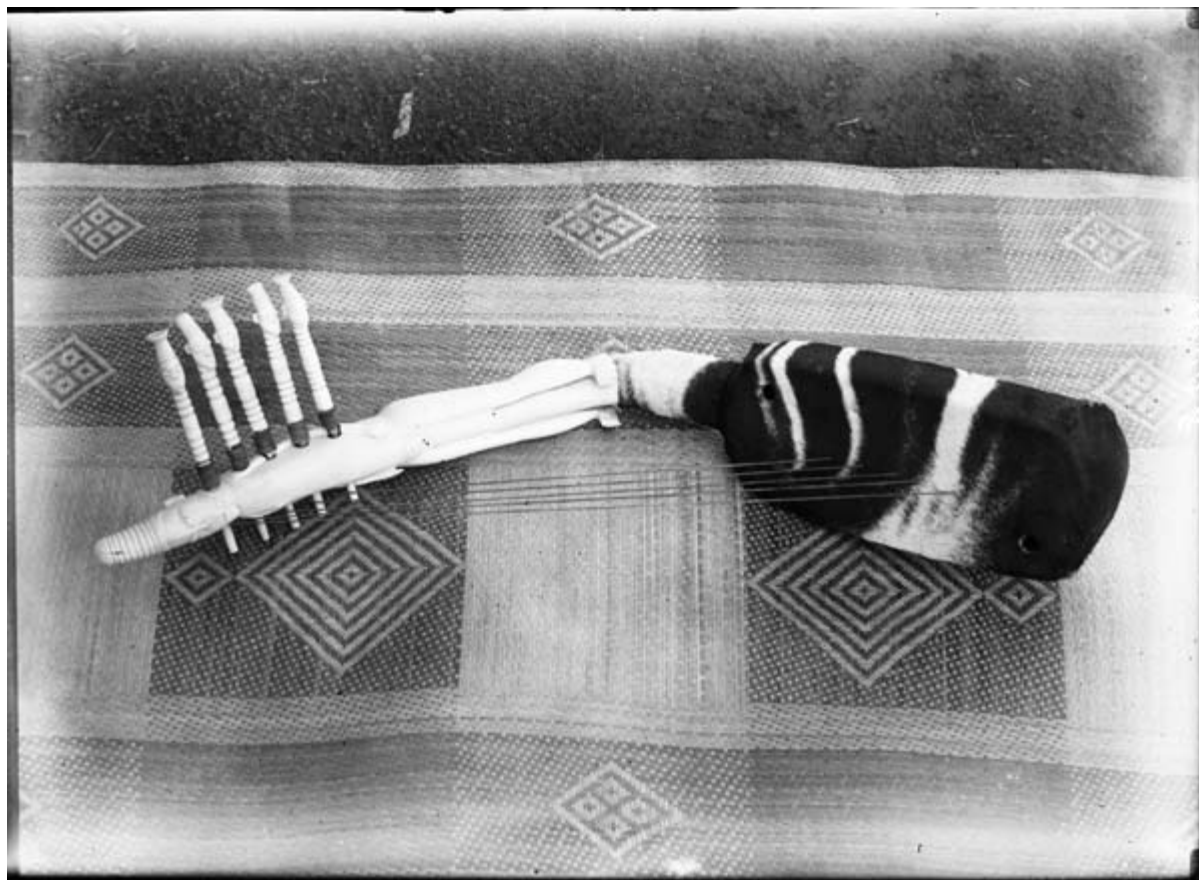


Image # 111908

Africans living in and near the Ituri Forest considered the okapi a powerful and mysterious animal. This harp, commissioned by Chief Okondo, is covered with okapi hide, a material said to convey powers to its owner.



H. H. JOHNSTON PINK

W. H. B. & CO. LONDON & NEW YORK

THE OKAPI.
(OKAPIA JOHNSTONI)

REDUCED ONE HALF FROM SIR HARRY JOHNSTON'S ORIGINAL PAINTING
REPRODUCED FROM PROCEEDINGS ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY, LONDON, 1901. VOL. II

Reproduced from the original painting by Sir Harry Johnston, pg 660, Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution 1901. Washington, 1902.



Image # 111126

Lang's note: Habitat of the Okapi--north of Niapu. A brook in which Okapis had walked for some distance, Niapu, Congo Belge
Oct 1913

Lang called the swampy, hot, and dense okapi habitats in the Ituri Forest "the most dismal spots on the face of the globe."

Finding and retrieving okapi specimens was one of the expedition's most celebrated public missions. Henry Osborn, the Museum's President at the time, wanted to "obtain for the American public materials for a habitat group of the Okapi before the progress of civilization should make this impossible," wrote Lang. When Lang and Chapin set out on their expedition in 1909, they hoped not only to bring back dead specimens of okapi to display in the Museum, but they also hoped to bring back at least one live specimen for display at the Bronx Zoo.

"After traveling up the river to Stanleyville, twelve hundred miles inland, and after marching with a caravan of two hundred porters for twenty-one days across the forests to the northeast, we reached Avakubi and later arrived at Medje, a nine-day journey to the northwest, where we made our headquarters," wrote Lang.

From Medje, they traveled southward into the remote territory governed by the chief Banda. They had dismissed all but 25 of their porters so they wouldn't overtax sparse local food supplies.

Though the Belgian government had originally assigned a dozen soldiers to guard them, Lang and Chapin sent them home, too, because their presence so intimidated the locals that they would not cooperate with the okapi hunt.

After earning the trust of the local people in Banda's tribe, Lang stationed native assistants in camps throughout the surrounding forest, waiting for reports of captured okapi. Dead animals deteriorate quickly in the steamy tropical forest, so Lang would bolt to any reported capture site.

"As news of the Okapi arrived," he wrote, "I ran out day by day, crossed swamps and rivers...slept in the forest, and joined their hunting parties even in the dead of night."

Okapis are extremely sensitive to sound. They hide in the almost impassible, dense, and swampy thickets in the daytime, and enter the more open, higher, drier parts of the forest to feed at night. Okapi use the sandy riverbeds as paths through the thickets. As the sun sets, they head for the hills again, spending most of the time in the higher, drier parts of the forest where the trees are thinner.



Image #

Lang's note: Okapi, male. Total side view, somewhat from the rear, Niapu, Congo Belge, Jan 7, 1914

Okapi are solitary and extremely wary of humans. Their shyness, keen sense of smell, and excellent camouflage make them difficult to spot, let alone to catch.



Image # 111435

Lang's note: Okapi, male. Total side view with Abawa, an Avingura [Avungura], and an excellent hunter, Akenge, Congo Belge, Oct. 15, 1915

Africans had hunted okapi for centuries before westerners "discovered" the animal. Hunters would carefully place leaves under a fallen okapi's head. It was considered a dangerous desecration to allow a hunted okapi's head to directly touch the earth. This specimen, its head propped up to make it look alive, was photographed with the hunter who killed it.



Image # 111312

Lang's note: Habitat of the Okapi--accessories. Study of a section of the creeper. Shows also separated leaves, Akenge, Congo Belge, Oct. 15, 1915

In addition to getting the animal specimens for the okapi diorama, Lang and Chapin also collected hundreds of other specimens, such as these plants. Some were dried, others bottled. Lang also took photos and Chapin sketched to help provide exhibit designers the material they needed to recreate as accurate a representation of okapi habitat as possible.

Native methods for catching okapi included nets, pitfalls, and noose traps. The first method required hundreds of hunters working together to drive the animals into the nets and it was rarely used. The most common method was the use of noose traps, which were set throughout the okapi's range and checked every couple of days. "Once caught, the animals usually kill themselves from fright," wrote Lang, and since days usually passed before Lang could get to the corpse, it was very hard to get a good specimen this way.

After many months of frustration, Lang finally recruited the help of Akenge, a powerful Azande chief who allowed Lang to join one of his annual hunting trips. The two-month trip was fruitful and the collections of rare animals were great, but still no acceptable okapi was found. Six weeks after their hunting expedition ended, one of Akenge's sons, Abawe, sent a message to Lang saying he was about to capture an infant okapi. The next day he made good on his promise and caught a week-old calf.

Unfortunately, ten days after its capture the calf died from lack of mother's milk. Lang's eight cans of condensed milk gave out after only four days and low river water had prevented steamers from getting provisions as high as usual up the Ubangi and Aruwimi rivers. Lang futilely tried to keep the little calf alive on a mixture of rice flour and water.

Although they did not bring home the coveted living specimen, the expedition did gather animals and materials for the world's most complete and accurate okapi habitat diorama of its day. It is still on display in the Museum's Carl Akeley Hall of African Mammals.

Today, about 5,000 of the 30,000 or so existing okapi inhabit the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, which occupies much of the Ituri Forest explored by Lang and Chapin in the northeast of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Okapi have been protected by government decree since 1933, but commercial poaching and other human pressures in this war-torn country pose increasing threats.



This juvenile okapi was captured by Abawe, the son of the powerful Azande Chief, Akenge. Lang hoped to bring it back the U.S. alive, and to turn it over to the New York Zoological Society at the Bronx Zoo. Unfortunately, Lang ran out of milk to feed the okapi and it perished.



Image # 1709

The okapi diorama, still on display in the Carl Akeley Hall of African Mammals, illustrates how well an okapi's unusual coloration helps it to blend into the dense forest habitat.

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