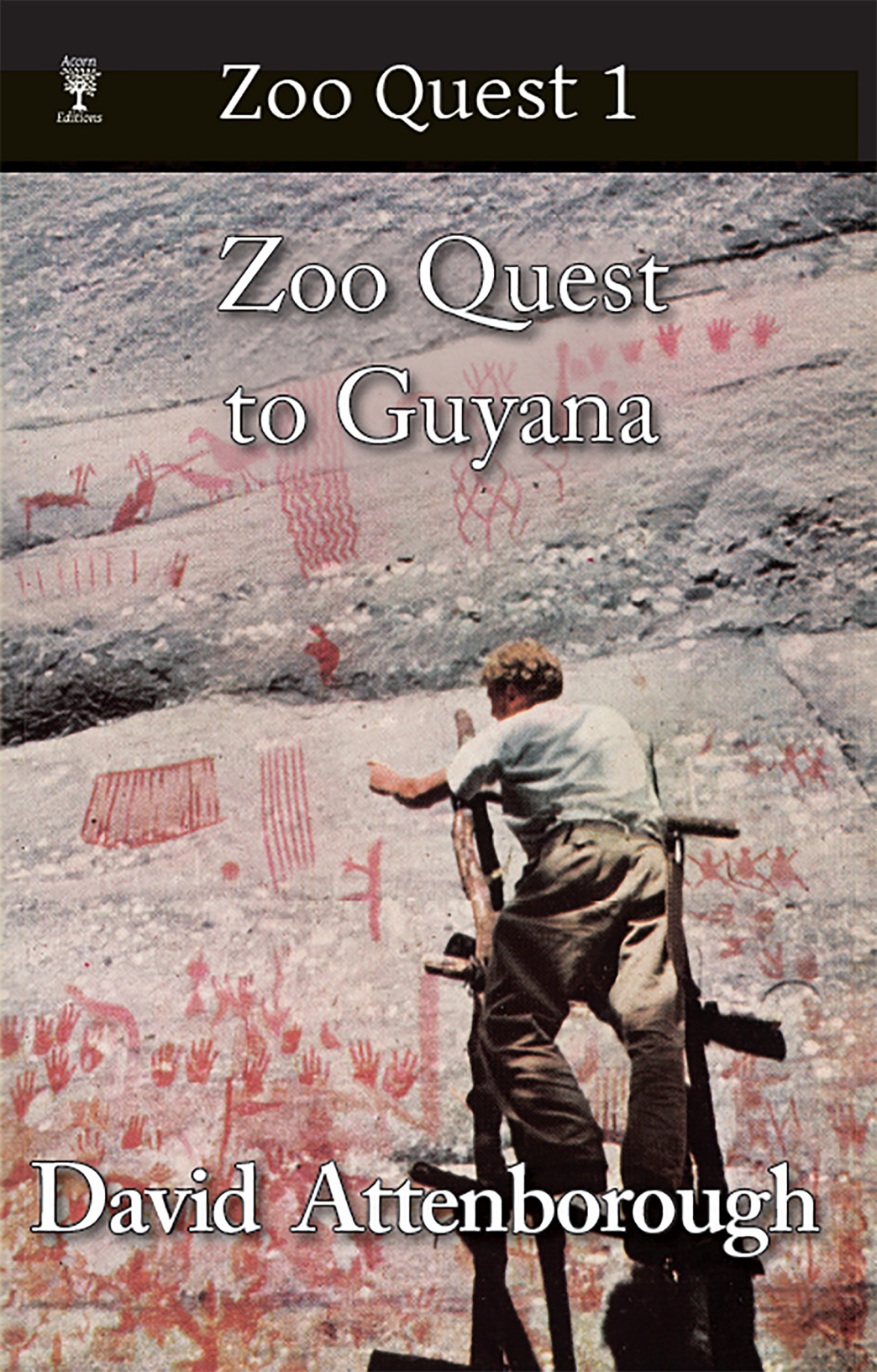


# Zoo Quest 1

A photograph of a man with curly hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt and dark trousers, standing on a wooden ladder. He is painting red handprints on a large, light-colored rock wall. The wall is covered with many red handprints and other red markings, including some animal-like figures and vertical lines. The scene is outdoors, and the rock wall appears to be part of a natural rock formation.

## Zoo Quest to Guyana

David Attenborough



*The tamandua or tree anteater above an ants' nest*

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# Zoo Quest to Guyana

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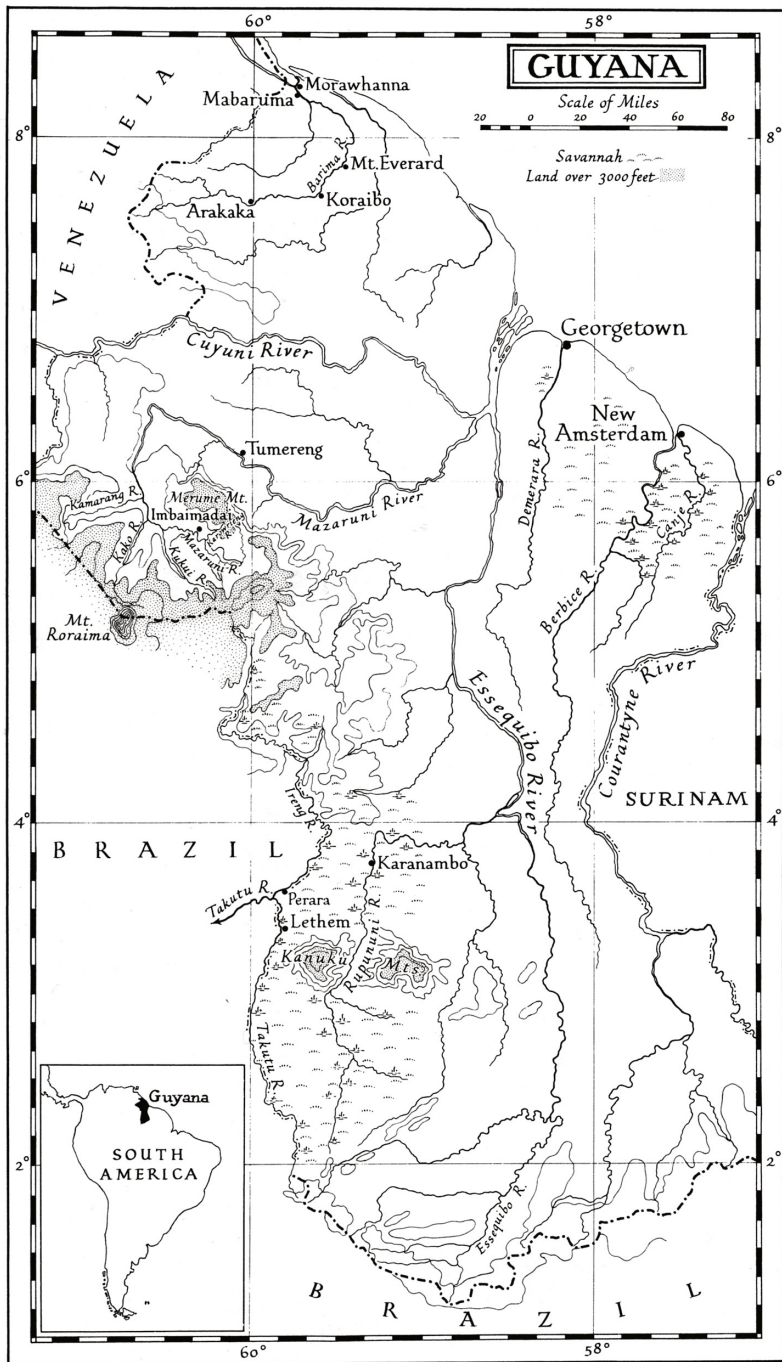
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# Introduction

These days zoos don't send out animal collectors on quests to bring 'em back alive. And quite right too. The natural world is under more than enough pressure as it is, without being robbed of its most beautiful, charismatic and rarest inhabitants. Now most of a zoo's crowd-attracting species – lions, tigers, giraffes and rhinoceros, even lemurs and gorillas – have been born in zoos and kept track of in stud books, so that individuals can be exchanged internationally without incurring problems of in-breeding. They can then play a valuable part in familiarising visitors with the splendours of the natural world and in explaining the importance and complexities of conservation.

But it was not always so. London Zoo was founded in 1828 by men of science who were, at that time, still concerned with the important but almost impossible task of compiling a catalogue of all the species of animals alive today. Some were sent to it from distant parts of the world as dead specimens. Others arrived alive and were put on display in the Society's gardens in Regent's Park. But both kinds ended up as well-studied anatomical specimens and carefully preserved. Needless to say, special attention was paid to finding species that no other zoo had ever possessed, and that ambition, to some extent, still lingered on even in the 1950s when I visited one of the Zoo's curators with an idea for a new kind of television programme.

Television then was also very different from what it is today. There was only one network, produced by the BBC, which could only be seen in London and Birmingham. All its programmes came from two small studios in Alexandra Palace, in north London. They were the same studios and indeed the same cameras that in 1936 had provided the first regular television service in the world. Transmissions were suspended in 1939 on the outbreak of the Second World War, but then resumed as soon as peace was declared in 1945. So when, in 1952, I got a job as a trainee producer, British television had only ten years of practical production experience.

The programmes were almost entirely live. Electronic recording was still decades away, so the only way we producers had of supplementing the pictures from the studio was with film. That cost money and we were seldom given enough to enable us to do so. This was not regarded as much of a limitation. On the contrary, both viewers and producers thought that the 'immediacy' was the medium's main attraction. The events appearing on the screen were actually happening=== as viewers watched them. If an actor forgot his lines, then the prompt was audible. If a politician lost his temper, then all saw him do so and there was no chance for him to have second thoughts and insist that his incautious words were edited out.

Animal programmes were already established in the schedules when I first started. They were presented by George Cansdale, the Superintendent of the London Zoo. Week after week, he transported some of the more reasonably-sized and amenable of his charges from Regent's Park to Alexandra Palace and put them on a table covered with a doormat, where they sat blinking in the intense lights of the studio, while Mr Cansdale demonstrated their anatomy, their bravery and their party tricks. He was an expert naturalist, marvellously adept at handling animals and persuading them to do what

he wanted. Even so things did not always go as he might have wished. That was part of his popularity. They regularly relieved themselves on the doormat or, with luck, over his trousers. Occasionally they escaped and had to be fielded by one of the uniformed zoo keepers lurking in the wings ready for such an eventuality. Once a small African squirrel leapt from the demonstration table on to the microphone, hanging on a boom directly above. From there it scampered across the studio and found refuge in the ventilation system. It lived there for days, making occasional appearances in the dramas, variety shows and epilogues that continued to come from its studio. On a few memorable occasions an animal even managed to give Mr Cansdale a nip. Such a moment was not to be missed and when he produced a particularly dangerous creature, like a snake, the nation held its breath.

Then, in 1953, a new kind of animal programme appeared. A Belgian explorer and film-maker called Armand Denis, together with his glamorous British-born wife Michaela, came to London from Kenya to publicise a feature-length documentary they had made for the cinema called *Below the Sahara*. They had put some of the footage they had not used in the film into a half-hour programme for television. It showed elephants, lions, giraffe and much of the rest of the famous and spectacular big game of the east African plains. It was a huge success. For many viewers it was the first time they had seen moving pictures of such creatures. Although the images did not have the live, titillating unpredictability of those produced by Mr Cansdale, people could see how marvellous and majestic the animals were in their proper setting.

Viewers responded with such enthusiasm to this new kind of animal programme that the television planners immediately asked the Denises for more. Why not a whole series that could run week after week? The Denises, who had been filming in Africa for years and had a vast library of animal

footage, saw the possibilities and needed little persuasion. So the first *On Safari* series began.

For me, a twenty-six-year-old novice television producer with two years' broadcasting experience and an unused zoology degree, anxious to make animal programmes myself, it seemed that each of these formats had its own particular attractions – and its own limitations. Mr Cansdale's had the undeniable thrill of watching living unpredictable animals, but since the animals were always in an alien studio environment, they looked, more often than not, bizarre oddities. The Denises' animals, on the other hand, appeared in the natural surroundings to which they were perfectly adapted, but they lacked the spice of live unpredictability. Surely, I argued to myself, it should be possible to combine the two styles in one programme and get the benefits of both. I had already, as a jobbing producer, directed music recitals, archaeological quizzes, political discussions and ballet performances. Most recently, I had devised a series of three programmes about the meaning and purpose of animal shapes and patterns. They had been narrated by one of the great scientific figures of the times, Sir Julian Huxley, and, to illustrate his words, I had borrowed some of the animals from Mr Cansdale's London Zoo. And in doing that I had met the Zoo's Curator of Reptiles, Jack Lester.

Jack, from his earliest days, had had a passion for animals, but lacking any formal training, he had first taken a job in a bank. However, he soon persuaded his employers to send him to a branch in West Africa, and there he was able to indulge his enthusiasm for collecting and keeping reptiles. When the war came he joined the Royal Air Force, but after it was over he got a job in a private zoo in the west of England. From there he had come to Regent's Park to care for the Zoo's large collection of reptiles. His office was a small room in the Reptile House, heated, like all the show-

cases, to a suffocating tropical temperature and filled with all kinds of cages containing his particular favourite creatures that were not needed for public exhibition – dwarf bush babies, giant spiders, chameleons and burrowing snakes. He had been a great help in selecting animals for the Huxley series, and I went there to discuss what more programmes we might do together. I thought I had an idea that might interest him, because it would get him back to his beloved West Africa – and I with him.

My plan was simple. The BBC and the London Zoo should mount a joint animal-collecting expedition on which we should both go. I would direct film sequences showing Jack searching for and finally capturing a creature of particular interest. The sequence would end with a close-up of the animal in his hands. The picture would then dissolve into a similar shot of the same creature, but this time live in the studio. Jack would then demonstrate, in the Cansdale manner, the particularly interesting aspects of its anatomy and behaviour. If there were a few unavoidable incidents, such as an escape or a bite, then so much the better. Viewers would then be returned, by way of film, to Africa and another search and capture.

Jack agreed that the idea was a good one. The only problem was that the Zoo at the time had no intention of sending out a collecting expedition. Nor had the BBC any intention of embarking on the highly specialised and certainly expensive business of making natural history films. That minor difficulty, however, might be overcome with a single properly stage-managed lunch at which bosses from both the Zoo and the BBC would meet, under the impression that the other already had such a scheme in mind.

The lunch duly took place in the Zoo's restaurant. Jack and I were there to prompt and steer our seniors. Both bosses left after coffee, each convinced that his organisation had a lot to gain from joining in the other's plans, and to our

incredulous delight the very next day we were both told separately to go ahead.

We agreed on the jungle without any difficulty. Jack's bank had been in Sierra Leone. He knew the country and he knew the fauna. He still had a lot of friends there who could give us help. I was convinced, however, that if the television programmes were to be a success, the expedition should have one particular objective – a rare creature that, since the Zoo was excited by such things, had never been seen in any zoo anywhere else in the world; an animal so romantic, rare and exciting that the quest for it would keep viewers watching programme after programme until in the last the animal was finally found. We could call the series 'Quest for ...' something ... But what?

It was a difficult bill to fill. The only animal that Jack could think of in Sierra Leone that might remotely qualify was a bird called *Picathartes gymnocephalus*. It seemed to me that rousing the British public into a frenzy of excited anticipation to see a creature with such a name might be difficult. Had it not got another, more romantic one? 'Yes, indeed,' Jack said helpfully, 'its English name is Bare-headed Rock Fowl.' Even that, I thought, would scarcely do the job. But Jack could think of no other. So *Picathartes* became our ultimate target and I decided to call the series simply *Zoo Quest*.

There was a further issue to be settled. The film used by television at that time was 35 mm wide, the same as that used by the feature-film industry. A single roll was about the size of a flattened football, and the camera that used it was as big as a small suitcase. In normal circumstances it needed to be mounted on a tripod with two people to handle it. Armand and Michaela Denis had used a much smaller piece of equipment that used 16 mm film, and I wanted to do the same.

The head of the television film department was outraged: 16 mm, he said, was for amateurs. Professionals despised it. Its pictures were unacceptably fuzzy. He would rather resign than agree to such lowering of standards. A meeting was called by the head of television programmes. I put my case. I could not get the shots I needed, I explained (with the confidence of having never done anything of the kind), unless I used the much smaller, more easily handleable equipment.

Eventually the argument went my way. But in accepting the decision, the head of films had a proviso. Television at that time was black and white. The 16 mm film we should use, however, should not be black-and-white negative from which positive prints could be taken, but colour negative. This was not as sensitive as some black-and-white stocks, but black-and-white prints taken from it had much better resolution. I accepted and agreed that we would only use black-and-white negative in very exceptional circumstances where the light was extremely dim.

None of the BBC's staff cameramen, however, would agree to use 16 mm equipment. I would have to find a cameraman for myself. I made a few enquiries and discovered that a man of my own age had just returned from the Himalayas where he had been the assistant cameraman filming an expedition looking (unsuccessfully) for the Abominable Snowman. His name was Charles Lagus. We arranged to meet in a pub close to the studios where television people habitually met. We drank a little beer. We laughed at the same jokes. He thought the trip sounded fun and after a second drink, he agreed to come. Jack too enlisted a recruit, Alf Woods, a wily and sagacious head keeper who was then in charge of the Zoo's Bird House. He would have the job of caring for the animals as they were caught. So, in September 1954, the four of us departed for Sierra Leone.