

[The range of the Rufous-necked Scimitar Babbler (*P. ruficollis ruficollis*) is given in the *Fauna* (2nd edn.) as 'Nepal to Eastern Assam; north of the Brahmaputra.' Eds.]

VII.—A VISIT TO MASKAN AND AUHA ISLANDS IN THE PERSIAN GULF, OFF KUWAIT. MAY 7th 1942.

I had some days previously consulted one Ibrahim al Fauderi, the light keeper and fisherman of Maskan, (pronounced Maschan) as to the best time to pay a visit to Auha Island, as I wanted to see the birds nesting there. He told me that last year his sons had visited the island on the 23rd of the Arabic month (Ra-biūth-thāni) and had collected some 150 eggs which they had sold in the Kuwait market.

'The Pleiades will set on the 25th of the month,' he said, 'and if you could come about the 21st the weather will be favourable for the expedition.'

I asked him to come again and see me a few days before it was time to go to enable me to make final arrangements. He came and saw me on the morning of May 5th and said that he had heard that his sons were proposing to go to Auha to collect eggs, but that he had forbidden them to do so as the 'Khatun' wished to go with them. So he advised an early departure.

All plans were made to leave Kuwait on Thursday morning early, the 7th May. I arranged to take with me our Badawin servant Salim al Muzeyin, who at one time had been a pearl diver, and his niece Amsha. A small 30 lb. tent, a camp bed and bedding, two local made rugs and a couple of cushions was all my kit consisted of. As a present to the family, whose guest I was going to be, I took half a sack of Karachi rice, half a sack of flour, one wagiyeḥ of 'Dehen', one wagiyeḥ of coffee, and a maund of firewood.

Early Thursday morning the sailing boat came into the harbour in front of our house in Kuwait, and the tide being high we soon loaded up our kit and were off on a nice westerly breeze. This breeze veered slightly two hours or so later, and we had to sail away to the north-west of the island. We eventually arrived at Maskan at 11.30 am. in a very hot steamy atmosphere. Ibrahim's home, a collection of small low stone built huts, stands on the west shore, while close to these is the navigation white light which is hoisted on a mast every evening at sunset. One tamarisk tree some 20 yards away provides shade for his cows and sheep during the noon-day sun.

The island is about thirty acres in size, and contains two good cement water tanks which are filled up from the rain water each year. There is good grazing, and brushwood in the shape of 'Shinan' (*Anabasis setifera*) which cover the island. These bushes are broken down—not pulled up by the roots—each autumn, when they are dry, and collected as firewood. Each spring and summer

the bushes shoot out again giving a very nice green appearance to the island.

Ibrahim's livelihood is fish which he and his sons catch in their traps and bring to the Kuwait market.

His family were made up of the wife, three grown up married sons with their wives and small children, his married daughter and three small daughters of five, eight, and ten years old. The ladies had a private sitting out place or 'arish', on the edge of the shore and near their house, rigged up from spare boat masts and poles, and roofed with the reed fish trap and Iraqi mats.

I pitched my tent just beyond this, and sat by day under the shade of the 'arish' on a mattress and cushions. Except for an hour or so before noon there was either a south or west wind blowing and it was delightfully cool for this time of year. Two nice cows came in to be milked at early noon, then rested under the tree till about 3 p.m. when they were milked again before wandering off to graze or pick up any odd dried fish which lay about. At sunset each cow was tied up and given a meal of date stones or a few dates, which they ate out of the empty shell of a large turtle. Some eleven sheep and goats also came in at dusk and were tethered up for the night under the tree.

The women of the household cooked me a most delicious lunch of rice, both sweet and plain, a variety of fish cooked in several different ways, dates cooked in honey, as well as a bowl of leben. For supper more rice and fish and an omelette of pigeon's eggs with butter sauce, and as an aid to digestion a glass of water flavoured with the pollen of the male date palm.

From midnight onwards a south wind blew and there was a very heavy dew. It was not possible to sail to Auha the following morning as I had hoped. So another day was spent lazing about on the island during which I went bird nesting with the children, and watched the men make their fish traps out of new reeds from Iraq, while others beat out the stems of the fruit of the date palm for rope to bind them with. This fibre is known as 'Assu'. These fish traps have to be continually renewed as storms break them easily. The fish caught were mostly 'Zobeidi', 'Subaity' Sha'am', at the time of my visit, though in the fish traps were usually as many as a dozen large stinging ray and their young ones. Ibrahim and his sons had at one time or another all been stung in many places on their legs by these vicious creatures and had been laid up for months at a time. Apparently the sting of the young ray can poison one as much if not more than that of the larger ones.

After dinner on the first and second evenings of my visit the lady of the house sat with Amsha and myself outside my tent and told us stories of the desert.

She was originally a Badawin girl, she said, her father being of the Shammar tribe and her mother an Aniziyeh, and she was brought up at the village of Aiyun close to Hail.

'In those troublous times,' she said, 'everyone carried rifles and the men would not think of going to the mosque to pray without one. Even girls were all taught to shoot and ride a mare'.

'Round about Hail, it was very hilly country and many deep caves existed in the hills. There was always a danger to our flocks and herds as panthers and hyaenas would come out at nights and try to steal our goats and sheep'.

'My mother told me the story of how when I was only a tiny baby of two months I was nearly carried off by a panther. My father had gone to the mosque to pray at sunset, while she accompanied by myself, then a tiny child of only two months, returned home with the flocks. When my father left the house he had forgotten to fasten the latch and, as we entered our yard, a panther which was inside made one spring and attempted to seize me from my mother's arms. His teeth badly bit my wrists and fingers but my mother uttered such piercing screams that the men came rushing out from the mosque, rifles in hand prepared to meet raiders or an enemy. When my mother explained that it was a panther, immediate chase was given, but it was too late and the animal escaped to the hills. The scars are still on my hands, in the morning I will shew them to you.' She did.

Our hostess also told us that somewhere in the hills, in one of these caves of her childhood there lived a fierce woman who was suspected of being a man-eater. Some persons had at different times mysteriously disappeared, and there were rumours of a kind of witch or vampire woman having been seen after dark, who was out to kill and eat the unwary.

Ibn Rashid of Hail was determined to put an end to these rumours, and if there was any truth in them, he would set his guards the task of capturing this woman.

For months and months many of his mounted men were sent out by night into the hills, and surely one night the report came that the woman had been seen stealthily emerging from a certain deep cave. At once a strong guard of armed mounted men was sent to the spot and the cave duly surrounded.

As this monster creature returned to her hiding place before dawn, she was set upon and captured, bound and brought before Ibn Rashid.

She was a terrible looking woman with large head and wild tangled hair and fangs like the fangs of an animal.

She spoke in a wild language which the men could hardly understand, and confessed that on one or two occasions she had eaten human flesh and blood. She could not say where she had come from or who she was, but explained that she was half man half woman—a hermaphrodite.

Before passing the death sentence, Ibn Rashid wished for evidence of her having killed and eaten human beings, and ordered her to take his men to her hiding place in the hills. The armed guards, on reaching the outskirts of the town, killed her and buried her as *per* previous arrangement.

A VISIT TO AUHA ISLAND.

At 3.30 a.m. on Saturday morning, May 9th, I was awakened by Ibrahim calling outside my tent.

'The wind is from the west, make ready and we will go'.

By 4 a.m. we were all aboard and sailing towards Sa'ad and Sa'ida the two ancient mounds or shrines on the south-west point of Falaicha. Our journey to Auha had begun.

Auha Island is a small island with a sandy shelving beach on its north side.

It is about ten acres in size and lies off the south-east corner of Falaicha Island where there is a sand spit known as the 'Dewan'. 'Kharur Auha' is the name given to the deep channel, about one and a half miles in width, which divides Falaicha from Auha.

We reached Auha in our sailing boat—a Balam—and landed on the sandy side of the island, i.e. the northern most point at 9 a.m.

A flock of birds were sitting on the shore, and they rose as we approached. As far as I could see these were terns and gulls, though two were of a much larger type of gull, with head and wings black and a grey back. After these birds got up and gave the alarm, a large flock of about 100 Crab Plover also got up from the centre of the island, followed shortly after by another large flock. They twisted and turned once or twice before flying out to sea where they broke up into smaller packs of ten or a dozen birds each.

These small flocks returned and flew round about at intervals. Having landed on the shore we found two large eggs close together and immediately above the high water mark. They were each in a shallow depression with a few splashes of white droppings round the edge of the nest. The colour of one egg was pinky buff, streaked with bluey-grey, and blotched and dotted with dark brown to reddy-brown, measurement 2.58×1.69 . The colour of the other was creamy white with very faint blue-grey blotches and a few brown dots, lines and blotches. Measurement 2.57×1.77 .

The Arabs called them the eggs of '*Tarachi*', and they probably belonged to the two large birds we had seen get up from the shore.

As we walked up on to the island and approached the brown bumpy patch which was the nesting place of the Crab Plover, single birds would come up out of the holes, run a few yards with outstretched neck, and fly off. One large white egg was lying at the entrance to one of the holes, and another, slightly broken and quite fresh some way off. The sailors then began to collect the eggs, a tiring and hot task.

The mouth of the holes was about six inches across, and it was possible for a man's arm to be put in easily. The egg lay at the far end of the burrow, which was sometimes as much as four and half feet long dug obliquely in the ground, others were slightly shorter. Every burrow did not contain an egg, but roughly one in three only. The Crab Plover's egg is very large for the size of the bird, and white. They vary slightly in size as will be seen from measurements taken,— 2.57×1.82 , 2.62×1.88 , 2.64×1.78 , 2.53×1.55 . The usual number of eggs laid was one, but very occasionally two were found in one burrow.

The Arab name for these birds is '*Kumairi*' (pronounced Chuwairi). They say the bird does not eat fish, but lives on small worms and tiny crabs which they pick up along the shore. Hence the eggs have not a fishy taste and are much sought after by the Arabs.

I tried to shoot one of these Plover in order to identify them exactly but failed. My 16-bore cartridges were old and the heat made things difficult. I winged one bird which unfortunately fell into the sea and we could not get it. Its mate at once separated from the small pack and flew over it and around about it for some time uttering a plaintive cry, until it swam out to sea.

Ibrahim and I left the three men collecting eggs and wandered across to the south side of the island. Here we found the nests of what the Arabs call '*Zergi*', '*Ab al Khasaif*' and '*Sultani*'. Each nest was similar, nearly flat built of dry twigs and about nine or ten inches across. They were perched on the top of low bushes of '*Hamdh*' some twelve to fourteen inches from the ground. The eggs were bluey-green with an occasional splash of chalky white. In each of four nests we found one egg, with three eggs in a fifth one. One nest was placed on the top of some stones at the foot of a cairn, and another on the top of an old navigation iron post which lay on the ground, having some years previously rusted through and fallen, leaving only about ten feet of upright post standing.

Along this shore on the rocks we saw the owners of the nests, some appeared to be smallish black herons, and others pure white herons or egrets of the same size. According to Ibrahim the white ones were male and female '*Ab al Khasaif*', and the blackish ones were called '*Zergi*'. The ones he called '*Sultani*' had a sort of crest of long feathers down the head and neck. We found one broken egg lying on the ground close to a nest, and Ibrahim said that the birds broke them on purpose if they saw a person coming.

The burrows of the Crab Plover of last year and the previous year were to be seen in two other spots on the island. Again, according to Ibrahim, each year the birds dug new burrows some little way away from the old ones. The old holes were all closed and appeared to be filled in, probably by wind and weather. No plants or bushes were growing on them, although round about were bushes of *Hamdh*, *Tahma*, (*Scrophularia*) *Shinan* and a *Mesembryanthemum*.

Altogether seventy-four Crab Plover eggs were collected, besides seven *Zergi* and the two large Gull's eggs (*Tarachi*).

As we moved off to the boat the small packs of Plover began to return and settle on the shore some little way away until a large flock was collected, when they ran up the beach all together, then some 100 or so in a body flew to their nests, followed by more and more.

Ibrahim described them to me as having black legs about seven inches long, body all white except for a black streak on the back of the head and neck. I noticed also that they had some dark on their wings when flying, and their legs stretched out behind them.

He said that the previous year, he and his sons had taken seven birds on their nests out of the holes. They were only about the size of a pigeon, but good eating. One bird had laid an egg after reaching his house at Maskan.

The eggs when cooked were very tasty though the white was tough. Some of the eggs collected this year were very slightly incubated.

Last year there had been many nests of Terns on the shore which he called 'Hamr Mangar' (the red beaked one) and 'Hamr Maraikh', and the 'Kuwairi' were more numerous than this year.

We left the island at about 11-30 a.m. getting back to Maskan on a strongish south wind at 2-30 p.m.

Small black-headed Terns flew continuously round the boat diving into the sea after the small fish which scattered away from the bows. Only some dives were successful and more often the birds caught nothing. Suddenly two Terns overhead were attacked by a single larger dark speckled bird with pointed tail¹, which appeared to be endeavouring to catch and kill them.' They twisted and turned screeching all the while with the larger bird after them. Suddenly the attacker seemed to take no more interest and flew quietly off low down on the water and settled some way off. Ibrahim then explained that this peculiar bird lived on the droppings of Terns. It came after them and attacked and frightened them until out of pure nervousness they did as wanted, and the larger bird caught this and ate the dropping in mid air and flew off. Although I witnessed these attacks twice it was all so quick that it was impossible to see exactly what happened. Another theory is that the Terns vomited up the small fish they had just caught and this other bird caught and devoured it in mid air.

NOTE.

On Auha Island there were many dead small birds which looked like Martins—white breast brownish-grey upper parts—and a few swallows.

On Maskan Island many of the larger species of Bee-eater with orange and brown colouring were being picked up exhausted by the children. They were not nesting there.

The remains of a 'Hubara' (Lesser Bustard) and many dead martins and swallows were also lying about, obviously they had been overcome with thirst and exhaustion while migrating. I saw some small Chiff-chaffs drinking the dew from the 'Shinan' bushes in the early morning.

There was a heavy dew on each of the three nights I spent on the island. I noticed some other varieties of migrating birds passing through on their northern migration, but I was not able to identify them. Six Curlew were seen on the shore.

¹ Ibrahim said the bird had a forked tail like a swallow, but I could not determine this properly.

BIRDS' NESTS FOUND ON MASKAN ISLAND. (7-5-42).

(a) The Crested Lark, '*Goba*', were nesting. I found one small nest under a '*Hamdh*' bush with three eggs. The nest was completely made of dry '*Samaa*' grass and very neat. I also found a similar nest under a bush but very small and only about one and a half inches across, but with no eggs. The larks sang each morning and evening.

(b) The Green Bee-eater '*Kadhari*' had some fifteen to twenty nests all in burrows. One small white almost spherical egg was picked up at the entrance to one of these tiny burrows. They are dug obliquely into the ground for quite ten feet.

(c) Kentish Plover, '*Garawi*' were nesting. Their nests were usually on the dry hard patches of earth away from the shore, and were just a circular depression lined with chips of dried mud and pieces of broken sea shell. I found two nests containing three eggs and one nest with one egg. One bird was seen running ahead of us trailing her wing and taking a zigzag shoreward course. She probably had young, but I could not find them.

(d) The small Terns, '*Juwaida*' were also nesting and flew over-head screeching. One nest under a '*Hamdh*' bush contained one egg slightly more pointed than (c) above was possibly a Tern's, though the nest was similar.

KUWAIT,

VIOLET DICKSON.

PERSIAN GULF,

May 7, 1942.

VIII.—BLACK MAHSEER.

(With a plate)

With reference to your letter of the 14th January; when I originally wrote to you on the subject of Black Mahseer which led to the publication of an article in the Journal (vol. xlii, p. 804 et seq.) by Dr. Sundar Lal Hora, I did not realize the importance which was likely to be attached to photographs of these fish. I therefore only sent a picture of one caught by me. Luckily, however, I had photographed all four Black Mahseer caught by me and mentioned by Dr. Hora in his article. A photograph of one was published in his article and I now enclose those of the other three.

The $11\frac{3}{4}$ lb. fish caught at Ukiam on the Umkhri river in Kamrup District on the 20th December 1937 is illustrated in Plate I, Fig. 1. This fish was caught in gin clear, almost still, water and came rushing out from behind a rock to take a brass backed and silvery fronted 2 inch hog backed spoon, mounted with two flying trebles. In the photograph, the head looks something like a Boka. This is, however, due to the background and to the tension on the lower jaw by the spring balance on which the fish was being held at the time.

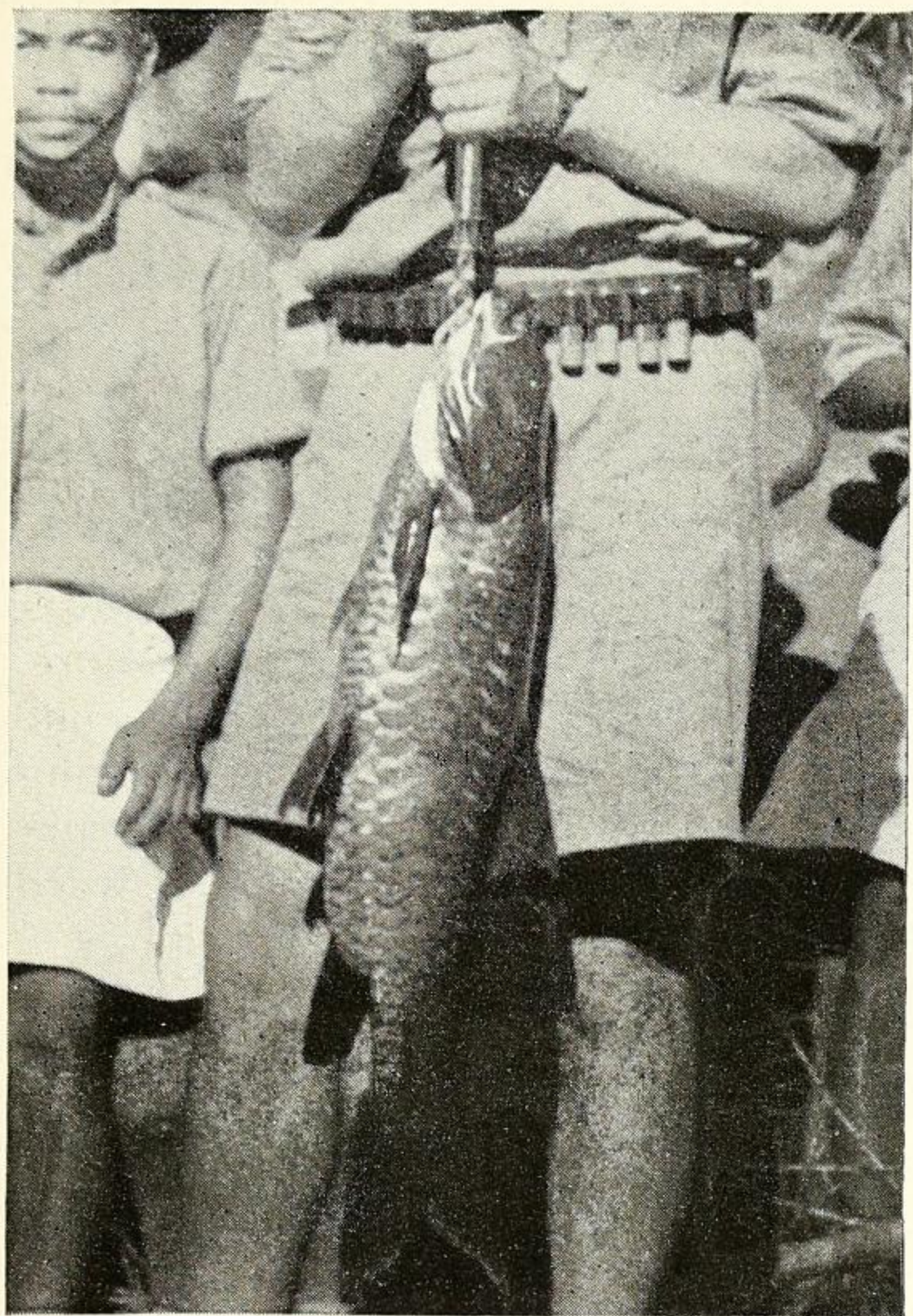


Fig. 1.—11 $\frac{3}{4}$ -lb. Fish. Kamrup Dist.

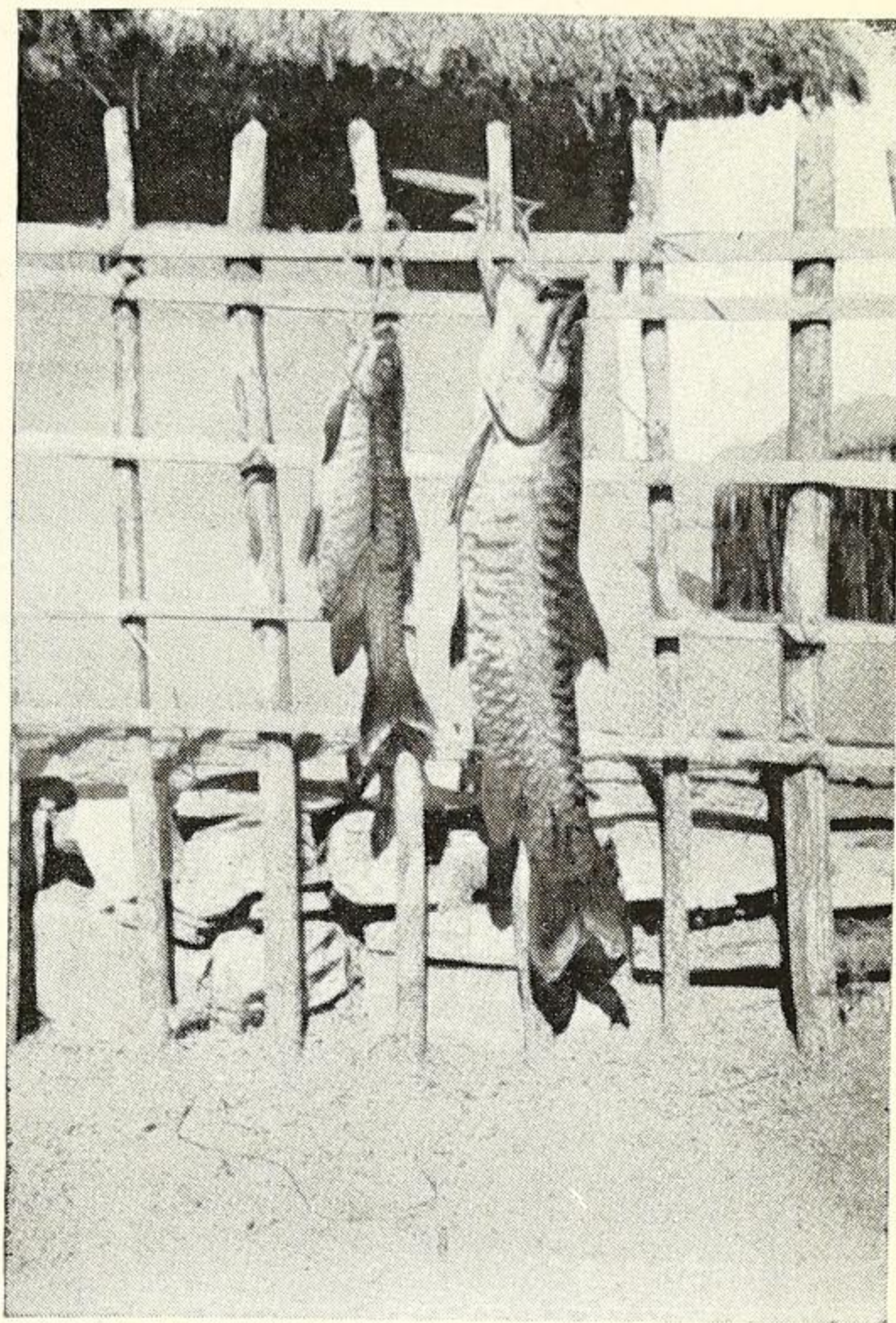


Fig. 2.—18-lb. Fish. Syom River.

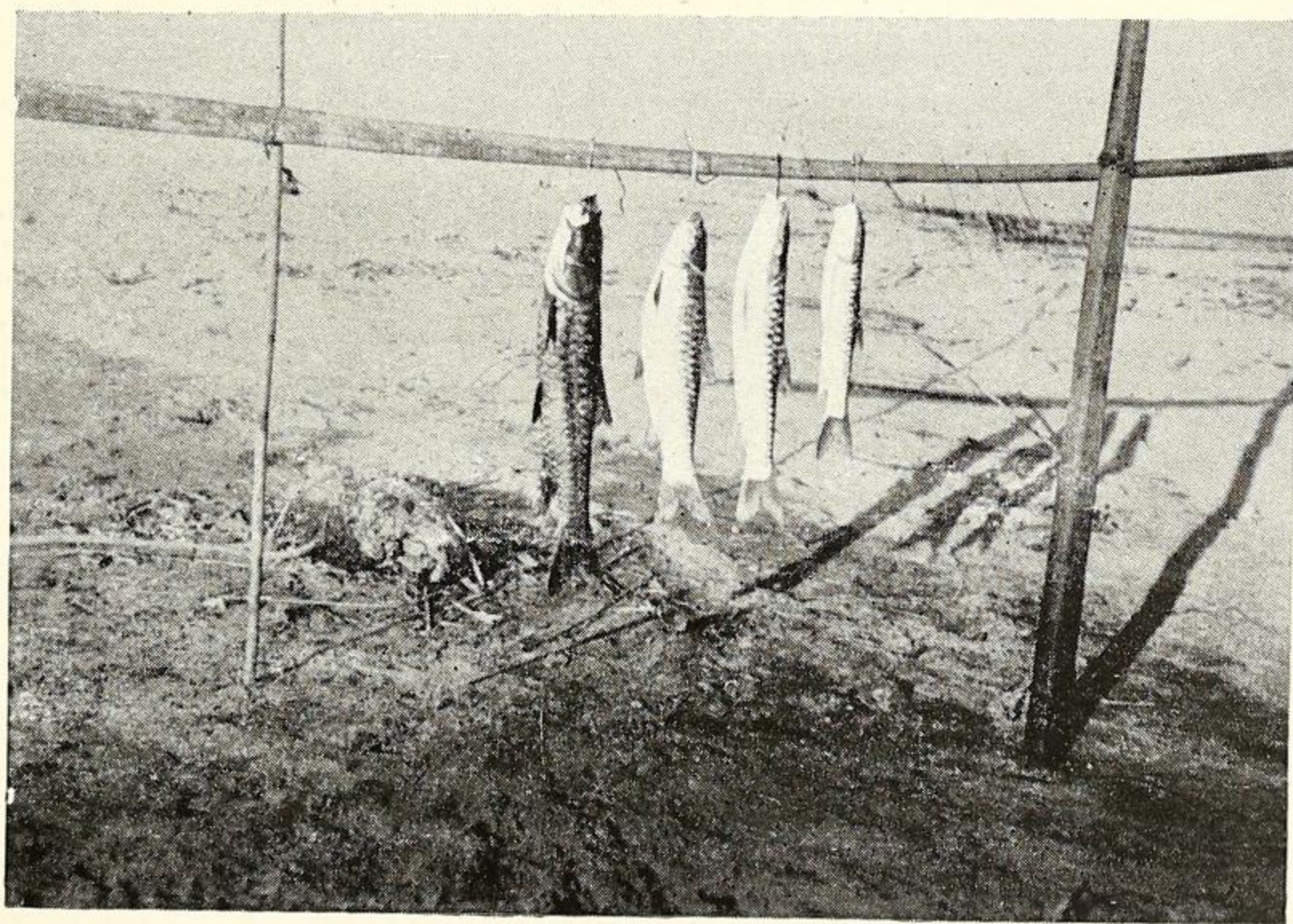


Fig. 3.—Smallest Black Mahseer seen.

BLACK MAHSEER

Photos by author.

