

Photo courtesy : Prasanto Kr. Bordoloi

wetlands alluvial grasslands, and wet tropical evergreen forests, literally burst with life.

Situated in Nagaon and Golaghat districts of Assam on the southern bank, of the Brahmaputra Kaziranga lies at the foot of the Mikir Hills that rise to a height of 1,220m, some eight kms from Bokakhat. The arterial National Highway No. 37 of Assam State forms the southern boundary of the 428 sq. km. park (proposals to double the area are pending). The Mora Diphlu, Bhengrai and the Diphlu rivers also drain the park together with countless smaller streams that feed the many *beels* (lakes) that dot the park.

For anyone who has not been to Kaziranga, it is difficult to explain just how bountiful and fecund its miraculous ecosystem is. When it rains, for instance, everything around you drips with green life. Small and large small pools of water literally 'boil' with millions of young fish waiting for the Brahmaputra River to break its banks to carry them downstream to West Bengal and Bangladesh.

I can say with confidence however that nothing I have ever seen in India can quite compare with Kaziranga's wetlands, alluvial grasslands, and wet tropical evergreen forests. The product of an annual flooding that brings with it some of the richest silt in the world, Kaziranga is elephant country, tiger country and rhino country all rolled up in one.

Though it is not a tiger reserve, the protection afforded to the rhino in Kaziranga has worked to the tiger's advantage. Possibly, the densest population of tigers in the world is to be found here.

### Kaziranga, paradise on earth

"No one can enter the place. It is all swamps and leeches and even elephants

# Kaziranga - *Pride of the World*

*Bittu Sahgal*

cannot go there, "was the response of a British forest officer in 1930 to the famous naturalist E.P. Gee, author of *Wildlife of India*, who had requested permission to visit Kaziranga.

Home to the world's largest Asiatic one-horned rhinoceros population (above 1,600), Kaziranga harbours at least 15 mammals listed -under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, including elephants, wild buffalo and tigers. The Brahmaputra River (that originates in China and ultimately flows into the Bay of Bengal through Bangladesh) is visible from the northern boundary of the park and stretches like an open sea, large and powerful. Kaziranga's ecosystems, comprising



Photo courtesy : Prasanto Kr. Bordoloi

Tall dense grasslands, typical of the floodplains of the Brahmaputra, carpet almost half the park area and are interspersed with open forests. The streams and numerous small *beels* that form when the floods recede constitute an interconnected riverine habitat.

The hills have always offered refuge to the animals from floods, but in recent years human settlements have prevented such

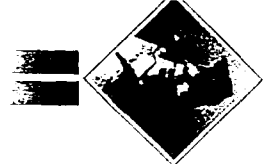


Photo courtesy - Ri:u Raj Ko-

escape. Visitors who choose to explore all three of Kaziranga's distinctive habitats in the Western, Central and Eastern Ranges can sample the flavour of this world-famous rhino refuge in a matter of two days. To really savour the wilderness, of course, you would be advised to stay longer.

### The leaves of time

Kaziranga was originally established as a reserved forest in 1908. It became a game sanctuary in 1916 and a favourite haunt for poachers and hunters alike, all after rhino horn. In response to outcries that the rhino was headed for extinction the shooting was stopped and it was declared

Kaziranga was declared a National Park in 1974 and the original core area of 428 sq km was declared a World Heritage Site in December 1985. It is here that the one-horned rhino is making its main stand, though populations are thinly represented in other states including Jaldapara in West Bengal and the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve in Uttar Pradesh (where they were reintroduced).

The Brahmaputra is said to be the only 'male' river in India, so named because he is considered to be the son of Brahma (putra - son), the Creator of the universe. Some people now suggest that the river is behaving like Shiva the Destroyer on



### The statistics of Kaziranga puts a smile on the face

- The largest population of One Horned Rhinos (1700 today as against 1552 in 1998)
- Highest ecological density of Royal Bengal Tigers (86 as per 2000 census)
- 1431 Asiatic Wild Buffaloes – the largest in the world since 2001
- Largest population of Eastern Swamp Deer (468 as per 2000 census)
- 1048 Asiatic Elephants in 2002

a forest reserve (230 sq km) and then a wildlife sanctuary in 1926. Kaziranga was opened to visitors in 1938 thanks to the initiative of A. J. W. Milroy, Chief Conservator who had managed to put an end to much of the poaching. In the 1950s large tracts of tropical forest were cleared for the tea industry and with it came more people. Much of the wild habitat of Assam was consequently lost to human settlement and their attendant ills (poaching is still a major problem). In 1954 the rhino was given legal protection through the Assam (Rhinoceros) Bill that laid down heavy penalties for killing the pachyderms.

account of its penchant to send down devastating floods.

### The animals of Eden

If you set off early in winter, a thin ground mist cloaks the grasslands. Through this mist, wild buffaloes, rhinos, elephants and deer tend to appear and disappear like apparitions in a strange and exotic setting. Rhinos are generally seen alone, unless accompanied by calves; occasionally, two males may be seen sparring. On rare occasions, however, you could conceivably see up to 30 rhinos in the open grasslands from the Dunga watchtower in the Central

Range. Many visitors get to see lone bulls grazing a short distance from the main highway before even entering the park.

Herds of wild buffalo can be approached quite close on elephant back, but they can also be observed through binoculars, from the tall watch towers built for wildlife viewing. Elephants never used to stay all year round in Kaziranga, choosing to depart during the floods. But in recent years population pressures from the surrounding tribals' settlements have disrupted elephant migration routes or 'corridors'. They can consequently be seen in the park for 12 months now. They tend to concentrate around the *beels*, which offer food and water. Gaurs too have had to adapt to human disturbance outside and are now a more common sight in the park. While this may sound good for tourism, it may prove to be quite disastrous for Kaziranga in the long run as over-grazing is a distinct possibility.

Other mammals include the capped langur, rhesus macaque, a small population of Hoolock gibbon, tiger, leopard (common in Kanchanjhuri in the Western Range).

sloth bear (in grassland and woodland), Gangetic dolphin (in the stagnant *Mihi beel*), wild boar and sambar deer (in small numbers). Hog deer are abundant. Swamp deer, though threatened, are found here in their largest concentrations in Eastern India.

If you are very lucky and persistent you may see common and the smooth Indian otter. The flying fox and the Malabar flying squirrel are also residents of Kaziranga.

Reptiles include the water monitor, Indian python, common cobra, king cobra, cat snake, rat snake and checkered keel backs. An astounding 11 species of turtle are found in the park.

You may see the tiger (the only natural enemy of the rhino), leopard cat, sloth and black bear and the Hoolock gibbon. There are records of honey badger, crab eating mongoose, Indian civet and the dholes or wild dogs (they cross over from the Karbi Anglong plateau) and the Chinese pangolin. But these sightings would be

and Pallas' Fishing Eagles, Cormorants, Darters, Pond Herons, Egrets, Shags, Night Herons, Gadwall, Bar headed Geese (one of the most important Indian wintering grounds), Cotton and Common Teal, Brahminy Duck, Common and Demoiselle Crane and Spot billed Pelicans. Grey Pelicans breed here in a rookery near the Kaziranga Village. Other birds include the Black necked Stork (which also breeds here), Lesser Adjutant Stork, Pallas's Fish Eagle and Grey-headed Fish Eagle. Whistling Teal and Bar-headed Geese are the most commonly seen waterfowl. In the grasslands of the Eastern Range, with luck, you could sight some among the estimated 25 pairs of Bengal Floricans.

In the summer months a variety of orchids can be seen on display. They are epiphytes and take their sustenance from nutrients that gather high up on tree branches. Around now the silk cotton tree, semul, disperses its seeds in white balls of fluff that float through the air and add considerably to the charm of Kaziranga



*courtesy : Prasanta Kr. Bordalo*



*Photo courtesy : Ritu Raj Konwar*



*Photo courtesy : Ritu Raj Konwar*



*Photo courtesy : S. Patgiri*

very rare indeed. Recently tiger sightings have increased. Naturalists suggest they are forced to come out more into the open because unprecedented floods may have devastated vast populations of ungulates.

### A birdwatcher's dream comes true

More than 400 species have been recorded in the Kaziranga area, a birdwatcher's paradise par excellence. This list includes over 100 migratory species from as far a field as Siberia. If you drive slowly and stop frequently to listen to the sounds of the forest, you are likely to see many more birds, including rare ones that might easily be missed from a moving vehicle as they fly swiftly across forest paths. Grassland birds are easier to spot when your riding elephant flushes them from cover. Red Jungle fowl, Grey Partridge, Swamp Partridge, Kalij Pheasant, Pied Hornbills, Green Imperial Pigeon, Silver breasted Broadbill, and Jordon's Bush Cat are among the species that twitches could see in different areas. The splendid avifauna of Kaziranga also comprises some of the most brilliantly coloured hill birds like the Scarlet Minivet, Sun birds and Bee-eaters. Visible around the *beels* are Grey headed

In the winter months, most lodges should be able to organise an exciting cruise (on country boats with very loud diesel engines!) down the Brahmaputra to watch river dolphins. The trip can be particularly unforgettable if you organise lunch in advance, which can be cooked by local fishermen and had on the banks of the river as you watch dolphins.

Wetlands, grasslands, forests and riverine habitats fed by the Brahmaputra River... Kaziranga has them all. It is a World Heritage Site and is probably one of the richest, most picturesque wildlife habitats of southern Asia.

In this the 100<sup>th</sup> Year of Its existence, Kaziranga cries out for help. It is the pride of Assam. It belongs to generations yet unborn. If we of this generation cannot or will not save it, we will be very poorly remembered after we are gone.

*Bittu Sahgal is the Editor, Sanctuary Magazine. A love of nature made him start Sanctuary and Cub magazine in the early 1980s. He is involved with campaigns to save the tiger, and protecting coastal India and its fishing communities.*