

Newsletter No. 4



THE RHINO FOUNDATION

FOR NATURE IN NE INDIA

June 2002



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Publications of The Rhino Foundation:

- Survey of wildlife in Bherjan, Borajan & Podumoni RFs with a proposal for a wildlife sanctuary.
- Survey of White-winged wood duck and the Bengal florican in Tinsukia district & adjacent areas.
- Dhansiri Tiger Reserve. Revised proposal. • Birds of Nongkhylllem. • Newsletters, No.1 (1996), No.2 (1998), No.3 (2001). • Two posters on conservation.

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COVER: Clouded leopard *Neofelis nebulosa*. This rare cat is in danger due to habitat loss and poaching for its beautiful pelt. Its Indian population is confined to north-east only.

(Photo: ANWARUDDIN CHOUDHURY)

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Feedback

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Historical records of the Javan Rhinoceros in North-East India

KEES ROOKMAAKER*

As the Indian rhinoceros *Rhinoceros unicornis* today is the dominant species of rhinoceros in West Bengal and Assam, it is not always realised that formerly both the one-horned Javan rhinoceros *Rhinoceros sondaicus* and the two-horned Sumatran rhinoceros *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* similarly were found in parts of north-east (NE) India. However, the records are very few and confusing by their lack of detail. The Javan rhinoceros was the only species found in the Sunderbans of Bangladesh and India, and was even seen within a few miles of Calcutta around 1860 (Rookmaaker 1998). The animal became extinct there during the first decennia of the 20th century. The species was also found further north in parts of NE India, in places where today it is no longer expected to occur.

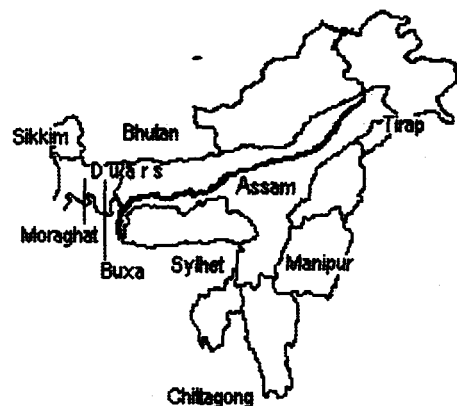
Because *R. sondaicus* was known both in the Sunderbans and in Burma (Myanmar), we would expect to find it again in the territories between these populations. It might have existed in Chittagong, as suggested by Pollok (1879) and Burton (1951), but there is not actually a single definite record which would confirm this, all rhinos caught or killed in this region having been two-horned animals.

Further north, a Javan Rhinoceros was shot near Sylhet, now in NE Bangladesh, by a tea-planter called Gordon Fraser. Wood (1930), who reported this, forgot to add a date and he could even have meant that Mr. Fraser lived in Sylhet and hunted elsewhere. Although rhinos were seen in the Cachar Hills of Assam, none have been identified as *R. sondaicus*.

The rhinoceros in Manipur seems to have been one-horned and this state could well have been the haunts of *R. sondaicus*. Higgins (1935) mentioned seeing a skull in 1913 of one shot on the Khuga River and being told that a few had been killed in the lower valley of the Barak River, near Tipaimukh. Although he thought that they probably were *R. sondaicus*, he admitted that he never had an opportunity to ascertain with certainty to what species they belonged. In 1874, a young one-horned rhinoceros was shipped from Calcutta to London, where it was bought by the

director of the Berlin Zoo. It had been caught in the district of 'Mooneypoor', an old spelling of Manipur. This animal was identified as *R. sondaicus* when it was in London, but later in life variously as *R. sondaicus*, *R. unicornis* and even as a new species called *R. jamrachii*. When she died in 1884, the zoo authorities forgot to preserve the remains. If she was actually captured in the hills of Manipur, may be she was in fact a *R. sondaicus*, because *R. unicornis* has never been definitely found there. Zoo historians would be happy with this conclusion, but we must bear in mind that the historical distribution of the two single-horned rhinoceroses in India is still too little understood to actually be certain.

There are no records of the Javan rhinoceros further northwards in Nagaland, Tirap or even most of Assam or northern Bangladesh. However, on the western side of the range, we find the species in the northern part of West Bengal, surprisingly as this is now only inhabited by the Indian rhinoceros. There are three known records. The first is found in the authoritative *Fauna of British India* (Blanford 1888), which said that an undoubted specimen of *R. sondaicus* was shot in the Sikkim *terai* by Kinloch. I tend to think that



NE India and adjacent areas showing places/areas mentioned in the text

AUCR/2

Blanford had heard rumours, which had been distorted. Kinloch (1892) wrote about shooting *R. unicornis* in Bengal in 1878 and 1886, and would certainly have referred to *R. sondaicus* if he had a chance to find it. However, later in life, Kinloch (1904: 65) mentioned that the Javan rhinoceros existed in the Bhutan Duars 'where I once saw one shot by a friend'. Another specimen was shot by J.A. Møller from Denmark at Moraghat, in the Jalpaiguri district of northern West Bengal on 24 February 1881. It was a young female, the skull of which (missing the premaxillae and some teeth) is still preserved in the Zoological Museum of Copenhagen. Finally, Shebbeare (1953) related that J.W.A. Grieve killed one early in the 20th century in the Buxa Forest Division, thinking that it was a small *R. unicornis*, but recognized as a Javan rhinoceros when it was mounted by the firm of Rowland Ward in London. One thing makes me wonder. The Maharajah of Cooch Behar gives details in his book of 1908 how he killed 135 and injured 34 rhinos in his district between 1871 and 1904 - and none of them were identified as *R. sondaicus*.

... shot by J.A. Møller from Denmark at Moraghat, in the Jalpaiguri district of northern Bengal on 24 February 1881. It was a young female, the skull ... is still preserved in the Zoological Museum of Copenhagen.

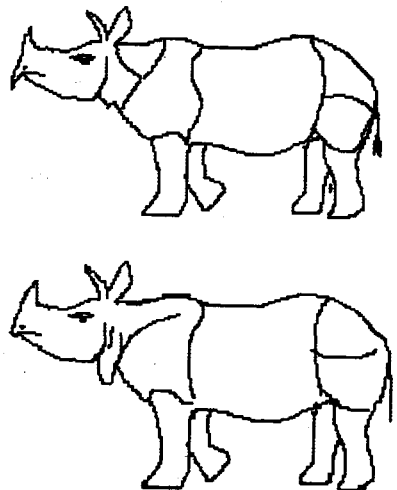
Most of the records given above are veiled by the passage of time. I would like to know more about those people who hunted the Javan rhinoceros in India and what happened to their trophies. May be other records will turn up in time. However, the *R. sondaicus* of Sylhet, Manipur and Bengal no longer exists, having disappeared during the first years of the 20th century.

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Javan rhinoceros *Rhinoceros sondaicus* (top) and Indian rhinoceros *R. unicornis* (bottom).

Illustrations: Anwaruddin Choudhury