

In spite of its heavy build the Indian rhinoceros



Above: Cattle egrets accompany rhinos and feed on insects which they disturb.

ARMOUR-PLATED

INDIAN legend says that once upon a time Lord Krishna decided to try out the rhino as an animal of war, because human riders on trained elephants were too easy a target for enemy archers. A rhino was captured, dressed in armour, and given suitable training. When, however, the animal was finally brought before Lord Krishna, it was found to be too stupid to obey commands, so it was returned to the jungle—still wearing its armour.

It is a fact that the Indian rhino has a thick skin—far thicker than that of the African species. Although its 'armour-plating' must be some protection against its enemies, both wild and human, it also has its disadvantages. The thick hide is really quite tender, and is easily bruised and cut. Almost every old rhino one sees in a sanctuary in Assam or Bengal is covered with cuts and bruises—mostly the results of bites from other rhinoceroses.

One of the distinctions between the Indian and both the two-horned African species of rhinoceros is the use which they make of their horns. The black, or hooked-lipped, and the white, or square-lipped, rhino of Africa have long horns which can be used as weapons of attack. The one-horned Indian rhino, however, never uses its horn for any purpose at all.

When on the offensive, the Indian rhino uses its tushes (the four prominent incisor teeth) for biting its enemy which it does with an upward thrust of its jaws. Its jaws are longer and, with tushes, more developed than those of the two African species.

When it draws alongside its fleeing victim, the rhino bites, but it is often only the tush nearest to the victim which makes a gash. This single wound used to mislead observers into believing that the horn was responsible for delivering the blow.

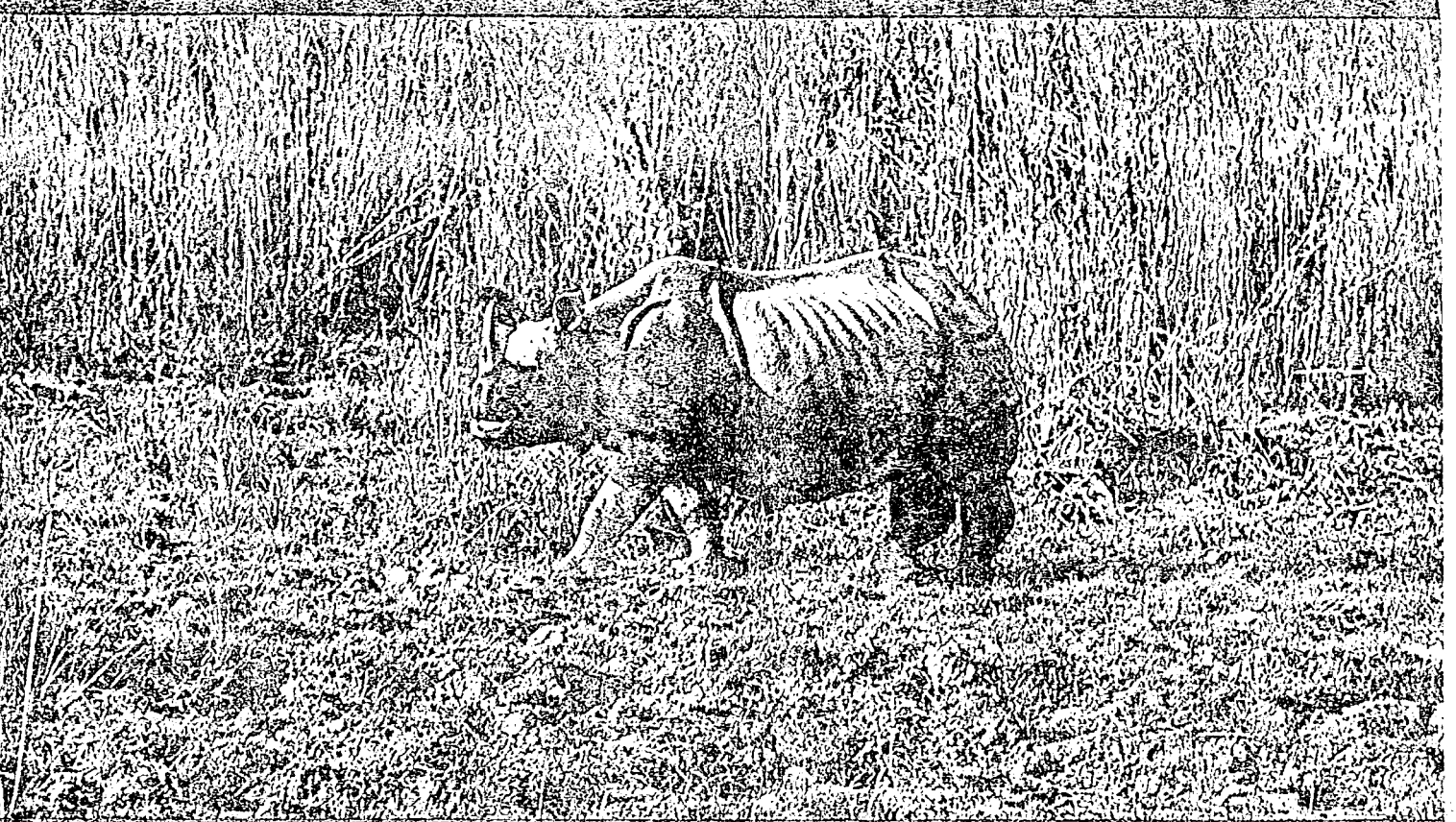
It has now been confirmed by those with experience of Indian rhino that the horn is never used at all. The horn is not even rubbed or sharpened in the wild state; when a rhino is seen in a zoo with its horn worn down, it is probably the result of scratching an itch caused either by parasites or by a lack of mud in which to wallow.

When a rhino is captured in a camouflaged pit, transferred to a travelling cage, and then kept in a stockade for a month to be tamed before being sent to a zoo, great care has to be taken to ensure that the animal does not become bruised or injured. All the bruises and cuts on its so-called armour have to be swabbed with medicated liquid mud several times a day until they heal up. Inci-

2435

Animals vol. 2

is so agile it can overtake a bolting elephant



RHINO

Above: Protected rhino in its natural habitat (the Kaziranga Sanctuary of Assam)

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dentally, captured rhinos, like wild elephants, quickly lose their fear of human beings and become remarkably tame.

It is well-known that Indian rhinos spend much of their time in a wallow of water or liquid mud. This is not only to keep them cool, for they also wallow in the winter, but mainly to prevent flies and other insects from intruding into the folds between the thick shields of armour-plating and laying their eggs. For this reason the Indian rhino inhabits the low, swampy country where such wallows are easy to come by; it could not exist in the conditions under which rhinos live in the drier parts of Africa.

In spite of its heavy build, the Indian rhino is remarkably agile and speedy. It can gallop, jump, and easily outstrip a young man trying his best to beat all Olympic records. It can still more easily catch up with a bolting elephant and inflict a gash on its flank.

Many books on natural history maintain that the Indian rhino is short-sighted, hard of hearing, or lacking in an acute sense of smell. I do not believe this. I think that most animals have properly functioning senses, but they only use some of them. A tiger, for example, usually hunts by sight and hearing and not by smell; but tigers have an acute sense of smell when they need to use it.

What is certainly true of the Indian rhino is that it is dull-witted. It makes no effort to hide or avoid its enemies as the tiger does, and generally blunders right into danger, sometimes charging when escape is the obvious course of action. Moreover it usually does not press home its charge, but stops short whenever its bluff is called, and thus exposes itself to great danger at close range.

For this reason the Indian rhino is an extremely easy prey for a man with a rifle. It very nearly became extinct at the beginning of this century mainly due to the improvement in, and the increase in numbers of, firearms. It would certainly have gone the way of the dodo if very strict protection by law had not saved it. In the Kaziranga Sanctuary of Assam, which is the chief stronghold of the species, its numbers sank as low as about one dozen in 1905, but they have now increased to nearly 300.

So far I have made only uncomplimentary remarks about this species of rhino, and so it is only fair to state that in the opinion of many others besides myself it is a more handsome beast than any of the other species, Asiatic or African. It is a most interesting creature in its tidy habit of depositing its dung only at special places, in its relationship with other animals, in its courtship and mating,

and in its habit of often spending the last days of its long life in the neighbourhood of villages—presumably for protection against its own younger, and more virile, kind.

The Indian rhinoceros is quite unafraid of tigers, elephants, and wild buffaloes, and as these three are all afraid of it, the rhino could almost deservedly be styled the king of beasts.

Rhino in Nepal and in the Indian States of Bengal and Assam have to be very strictly guarded against poachers who find it quite easy to trap a rhino in a pit or to shoot it. They do this solely for the horn—which is not horn at all, but agglutinated hair and is supposed in parts of eastern Asia to have medicinal properties. Research into the alleged properties of rhino horn have shown that it possesses no curative value whatever. It is to be hoped that those persons misled into believing in magical advantages to be gained from rhino horn will be quickly disillusioned.

Danger from tigers

Apart from man, the only enemy of the rhino is the tiger. No tiger will dare to attack an adult or even half-grown rhino, but a baby, like a baby elephant, makes a tasty meal. Many are the times that I have heard of a baby rhino falling victim to a tiger when the mother was momentarily off her guard.

An Indian rhino calf usually travels in front of its mother. The mother will often pause and probably communicate by sound to the calf, whereupon the latter goes ahead; this is especially the case where the grass is thick. This is almost certainly a precaution against prowling tigers which would only be able to attack the baby from behind its unsuspecting mother. When a cow rhino moves off at a fast pace in the open, however, the baby will follow behind.

It is interesting to note that in Africa the calf of the white rhino, which is a grazer like its Indian cousin, goes in front, while the calf of the black rhino, which is a browser, stays behind its mother.

The Indian rhino is usually described as the second largest of the world's five species of rhino, the white species of Africa being the biggest. The other species, in order of size, are the one-horned great Indian, the black rhinoceros of Africa, followed by the lesser one-horned rhino of Java, and lastly the Asiatic or Sumatran two-horned rhinoceros which is sometimes divided into two species.

It is not possible to conduct a census of the numbers of Indian rhino alive because of the very tall grass and reeds of its habitat. My personal estimate, however, is: Nepal, 185; Bengal, 65; Assam, 375, making a total of 625.

I have twice visited Nepal to advise on the preservation of the rhino and the creation of sanctuaries and parks for them. Long experience of being hunted has taught the rhino in this area to remain hidden in very thick cover during the daytime, only venturing out at night. At the sight of a human being on foot or on elephant-back they either foolishly charge, or more often flee into even thicker jungle.

Rhino in India, on the other hand, have become quite accustomed to human beings, and usually remain out in the open to graze during the daytime. This is the result of several decades of strict protection in sanctuaries. They can sometimes be approached quite closely on elephant-back, especially in the Jaldapara Sanctuary of Bengal, and in the Kaziranga Sanctuary of Assam.

It is to be hoped that these strange, but most interesting, prehistoric-like, 'armour-plated' animals will survive in their marshy habitat for future visitors from all countries to come and see.

*When moving in open country, the baby rhino travels behind its mother.
But almost invariably, where the grass is thick, the baby precedes its parent*

