

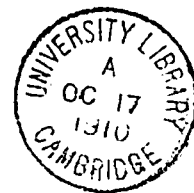
# FOREST LIFE AND SPORT IN INDIA

BY

SAINTHILL EARDLEY-WILMOT, C.I.E.

LATE INSPECTOR-GENERAL OF FORESTS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY MABEL EARDLEY-WILMOT



LONDON  
EDWARD ARNOLD  
Publisher to H. M. India Office  
1910

[All rights reserved]



A FOREST ROAD IN BENGAL

XI, 324

one than if he had lived long enough to attract many hunters, and to be fired at by a less experienced hand.

The Gorakhpur forests have been remarkable for other waifs and strays. A rhinoceros, perhaps carried down by the monsoon floods, once took up his quarters in the Government forest, and was soon observed, for in these small areas so large an animal could not be hid; and he, too, succumbed to a single shot from a Martini-Henry rifle, which easily pierced the tough skin on the shoulders. The history of one half of his hide, given to me by Mr. Clutterbuck, was curious. I brought to England a monstrous slab some inches in thickness, and it remained on my hands until I was due to return to India. Already I had in contemplation a midnight journey through London, to end by hurling it from the top of a four-wheeler into the murky waves of the river, when I fortunately met an enthusiastic golfer, who faced his drivers with rhinoceros hide, and attributed lightness and elasticity to the material. So to him joyfully I handed over the skin, and received in return a cheque for the cost of carriage to England, and a generous gift of two of the manufactured clubs; and later I often wondered, when congratulating myself on placing this skin so satisfactorily, how many pieces of the Gorakhpur rhinoceros were still wandering round the golf-links of the world.

It is curious how, as a rule, hunting trophies fail to fill any useful purpose in daily life, though amongst uncivilized men they are largely used both for articles of clothing and adornment, or even as

weapons of offence and defence. The pleasure afforded by the sight of a fine pair of antlers or of a well-cured skin is a personal one, consisting chiefly in its power of recalling vividly the detail of the struggle that preceded their possession, and to none other—save, perhaps, the naturalist—can such trophies be of much interest. They are not like a picture, or a statue, or an Eastern carpet, which embody the conception as well as the skill of the artist, and receive their beauty from the soul as well as the hands that have created them. Yet even in civilized life buffalo hides make trunks that may last a lifetime, and spotted-deer skins can be changed into leather bags whose pliancy is a delight. For the wanderer in the Himalaya nothing is more convenient than to use the bamboo baskets of the country, covered with raw hides. The hair prevents the rain from penetrating, and the hillmen thoroughly enter into the mild joke of calling for the tiger, the panther, the bear, etc., when each package is designated by its distinctive covering. But as the annual list of visitors to India increases, even tiger skins have their value. America takes many to decorate the rooms of the wealthy, in spite of the enormous duty levied by the Custom officials, and the young and needy sportsman will have the less chagrin in parting with one or two of his trophies if their proceeds provide him with a trusty rifle with which others can be obtained.

The Gorakhpur district is famed for its wild-fowl shooting, which can be easily obtained on many tanks and lakes during the winter months; but numerous guns are sometimes required if a large

so often stand in the way of the forester in his efforts to aid in the regeneration of those trees on areas where magnificent forests once flourished, or stand in splendid maturity even in the present day.

From the Rapti one crossed a stretch of level wheat and rice lands extending for miles before reaching the small Government forest of Charda. This is an area covered with an almost pure growth of "sâl," and opinion is divided as to whether it will grow timber or only fuel and small poles. The tree behaves as if it were disgusted at its isolation; it shows unusual sensitiveness, and refuses to grow either in the low-lying glades or on the "dihs," or elevated hillocks. These latter, they say, were the village sites of olden times; now they overlook the fruitful plains around, deserted save by the "nilgai," which loves such open spots. A curious antelope this, and sometimes a terror to the peasantry, whose crops he destroys, while meeting the objections of their owners with counter-threats which are not all vain; for the male has been known to turn on and kill his pursuers, and we ourselves were once held up by a fine specimen, who would not yield way to our horses. We had on this occasion no weapons save hunting-crops, and these he despised, snorting, grunting, and pawing the ground, as we approached; nor would he be driven off by two Forest Guards, who thought to treat him as they would a refractory bullock, so that, unwilling to have him a danger to passers-by, we had to send for a rifle and so end the affair. On another occasion a wounded bull charged an elephant with great determination; he was allowed to advance until there could be no

possible doubt of his intentions—so near, in fact, that he fell dead at her feet when struck by a bullet between the shoulders.

These animals fight each other with desperate ferocity; their passion obliterates every other instinct, and the hunter may approach within a few yards and watch the duel. The horns are seldom more than 9 inches long, but they are sharp enough to penetrate the thick hide of the chest and neck and to inflict serious wounds; and if one of the combatants is shot, the sound of the rifle does not deter the survivor from goring the fallen foe, in the belief that his prowess is alone responsible for the victory. In such cases it is best to slay the victor also, for "nilgai" are vermin, and will not tolerate any other deer in their vicinity. Their impertinence and other selfish qualities are due, doubtless, to their being classed by the natives as cows, and therefore safe from the village "shikari," though the villagers are glad to have them butchered so long as they themselves do not incur the penalties of mortal sin.

I have seen in the dawn an endless procession of "nilgai" on the banks of the Koriala River, and could have slaughtered a score without trouble; but there is a limit to being a cat's-paw, even though, as the natives evidently thought, a few more sins made no appreciable difference to the "sahib's" hereafter.

There were panthers in the Charda Forest, a wily crowd who declined all allurements; one patriarch in particular was fond of goat, but would eat only in perfect solitude, and I believe that his age was held to entitle him to a full stomach before his

industries whose estimates of profit would be based on a continuation of the physical conditions that their promoters were acquainted with. It has taken a generation and more to open our eyes to the necessity of protecting the catchment areas of our watercourses, and we find ourselves now in the predicament that we are bound to further the interests of the industries we have encouraged, while at the same time we demur to interference with the rights of those native States that possess the key to the position. A way out of the difficulty will surely be found as time goes on ; it would more speedily be discovered were British capital attracted to industrial enterprises in India: for then the water-power that now runs to waste would become a most valuable asset, and no doubt the native Princes would find it worth their while to permit the regulation of its supply where this is most easy to accomplish—namely, at its source.

There are rhinoceros and bison in the Bengal Tarai, but at the time of our visit these had become so scarce that shooting was prohibited. The Máharájá of Kuch Behar, whose palatial residence and estate adjoins the Government reserves, was an ardent and hospitable sportsman, and the head of game had become insufficient to afford diversion both to himself and to his guests; the planting community had also, in self-defence, thinned down these animals considerably, and, as it is the unexpected that happens most frequently in the forest, it was hardly surprising that we should meet these beasts when quite unprepared for an encounter. We had the pleasure of watching for

some time a bison, who in the absence of prohibition would probably never have been seen, and certainly would not have been so accommodating; and we for a time awaited the pleasure of a rhinoceros whose bulk appeared to block the width of the forest path, but who ultimately decided to permit our escape, though our elephants had already fled, their drivers taking full advantage of the well-known distaste of elephants for rhinoceros. That dislike, however, is not so pronounced as to cause the elephant to flee when none pursueth, and we formed no good opinion of the mahouts of Bengal, in comparison with those of Northern India, after this occurrence; for we knew from experience that, though the latter might on very rare occasions demur to taking the sportsman into danger, they would never leave him there alone to save their own skins.

There is excellent fishing on the river boundary between Bengal and Assam, and in other streams, and enthusiasts would have no difficulty in getting good sport. For shooting, a stanch elephant is a desideratum, but a great deal might be done on foot or on horseback. Tigers are frequent, but the grasslands extend over so wide an area that in the winter months tracking is almost impossible, save in the wide stretch of sandy watercourses, where in the early morning tigers are sometimes found basking in the warm rays of the sun. The ideas of the Bengali with regard to shooting over a bait are distinctly amusing. We entrusted ourselves to an aged "shikari," who placed us in a leafy bower, so large that a bridge-party might have been