



W
beautiful

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In February 2005, Kaziranga National Park, a United Nations World Heritage Site and one of the last refuges of the one-horned rhino, celebrates its centenary - of being an outstanding achievement in wildlife conservation.




he was ugly. Beady eyes, a big long snout that ended in a wart-like horn, an overhanging upper lip, long pointed ears, terrible skin, obese, a mean disposition... Indeed, he was so ugly that he was handsome. And he seemed to be well aware of his striking good looks as he posed for our cameras: first looking straight into our lenses and then presenting a picture perfect profile.

The shoot over, we dropped our cameras to half-mast and sat back to admire one of the star attractions of Kaziranga National Park – the Asiatic one-horned rhino. The magnificent beast held its ground even though it was up against a line of safari elephants that terried eager camera toting tourists through the untamed wilds of central Assam in the north-eastern reaches of the country. In fact, it was the elephants that displayed signs of nervousness as they waved their trunks at the rhino as though to warn it to keep its distance. Their caution was not without reason for foul-tempered rhinos have charged and inflicted grievous wounds on these gentle giants.

By itself the elephant safari was brief and short – a 40 minute ride that took us no more than 400 m into the grasslands – but it did ensure a close encounter with the magnificent rhino. According to our *mahout* (elephant guide), rhinos are fairly easy to track and spot in Kaziranga for the simple reason that they are territorial animals who return to the same spot every day to defecate. Hence, all one has to look for are large dung heaps as they are sure signs that there are rhinos close by.

Rhinos aside, we were rewarded with excellent sightings of other wild creatures that call Kaziranga home and these included the wild Indian water buffalo and a herd of *barasinghas* (deer), the males carrying their 12-point antlers with ballerina-like grace. The early morning elephant safari, however, was the overture to a larger Kaziranga wildlife adventure which was a wild symphony of different moods and movements.

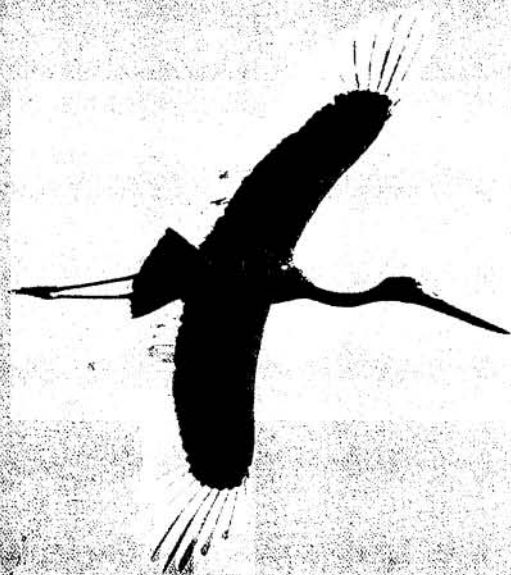
LEFT: A safari elephant strolls by a village on the fringes of Kaziranga National Park



...the white
...the
...of a rhinoceros
...it stroked across
...the left foreleg
...of nature's grand
...while the two
...other birds pecked
...at insects
...disturbed by its
...movement as
...though bowing in
...reverential worship
...at the feet of the
...lumbering beast

We picked up our forest ranger—
every vehicle entering the park must
have one accompanying it—at
Mbindi, the main entrance to the
park as well as the point from where
the afternoon safari is conducted, and
drove through a long archway of
rice. We emerged from the thicket
which was alive with the
movement of unseen animals upon
a sweep of green grassland
streaked with silvery blue pools of
water. A snow-white egret led
the flock of waterbirds that
gathered on the edge of the
pond. The birds were
not as tame as those of the
park. We were
in a large area of
the park. The
birds were
in the park.

The brilliant plumage of an Indian
... ..



We pulled up alongside an embankment further down the dirt road, climbed to the top of an observation tower and gazed out at the ever-changing tapestry rolled out below us: pelicans shifting the water with pendulum-like regularity in front of a wading rhino, wild ducks lazing on tingers of land stretched across the water as black-necked storks balanced on red stilt-like leg in the shallows, flocks of birds gracefully soaring into the blue skies above, the feathers on the tips of their wings twitching as they navigated the wind currents...

Since much of Kaziranga is open country covered by wetlands and grasslands the wildlife viewing is not only a treat here but it is probably the best amongst the wildlife parks, reserves and sanctuaries in India. Around January, each year the tall elephant



ABOVE: A black-necked stork soars into the blue sky
RIGHT: A colourful bird tries to camouflage itself in the thicket

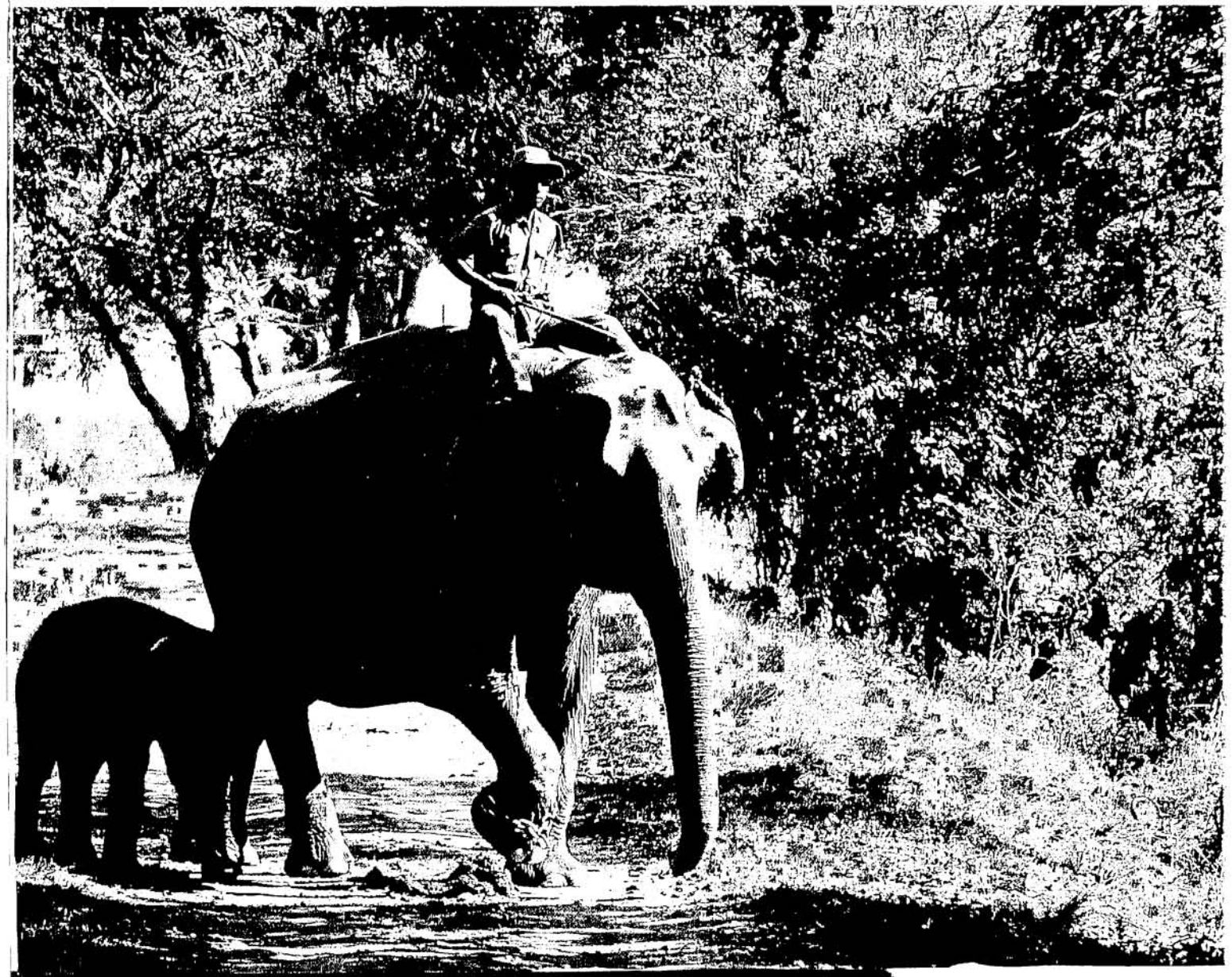


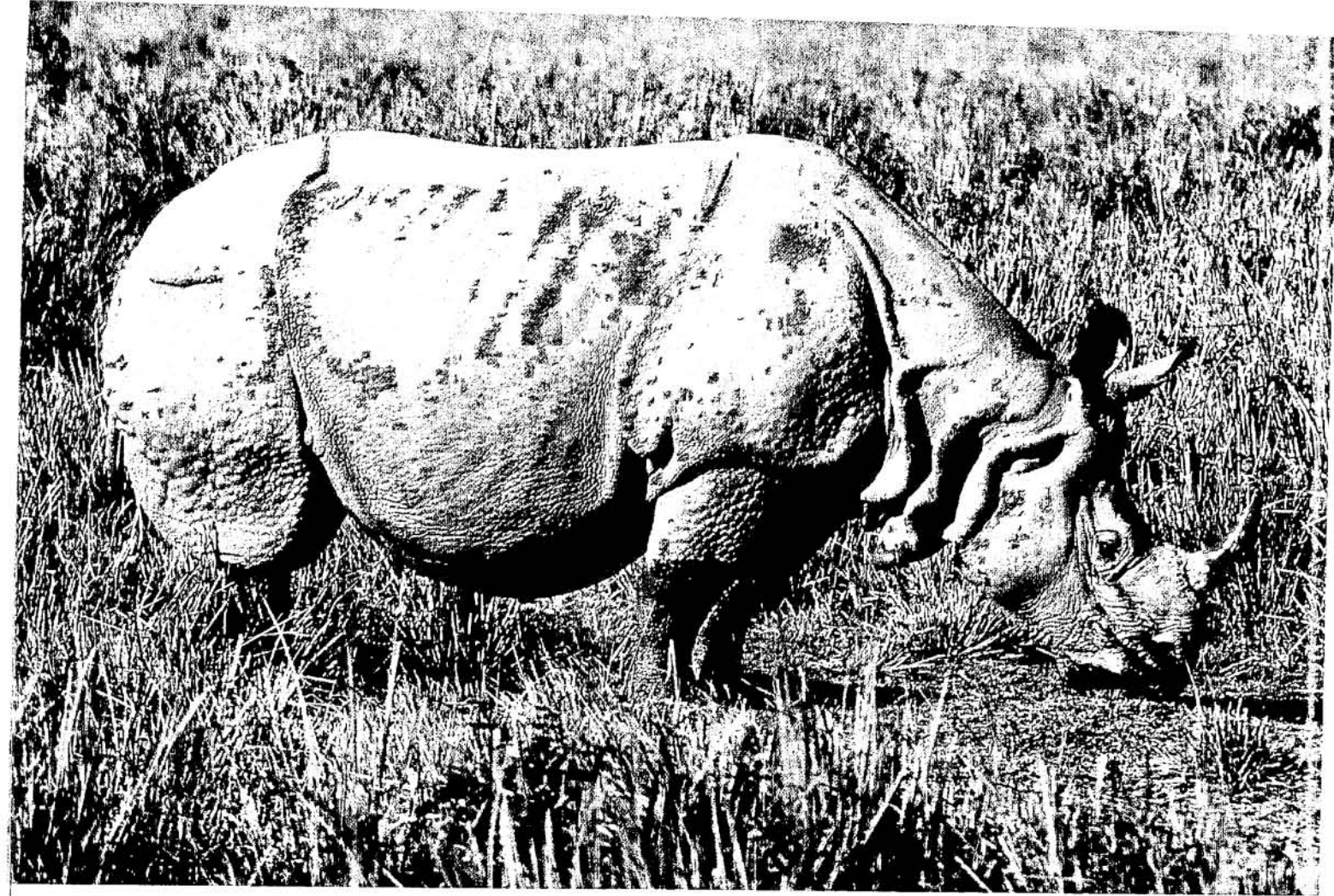
grass that provides a cover for animals is burned by the forest department in controlled stages and from February onwards up to May – when the park is closed during the monsoon months up to October – animal sighting is at its very best.

Back in our open safari jeep which allowed us a 360 degree view, we came upon a turquoise blue and maroon Indian roller perched on a twig by the side of the dirt track. Unlike most other nervous birds that flew off the moment our cameras were trained on them, this handsome specimen seemed to revel in the attention it was getting and posed willingly for us as we

LEFT: *Barasinghas* hide in the grasslands of Kaziranga National Park

BELOW: A safari elephant strolls across the forest trail with its calf





zoomed our lens to capture close-ups of the brilliant and subtle hues of its plumage.

As we continued on our safari drive, the forest ranger informed us that Kaziranga has a population of over 500 species of birds, adding that even if it did not have any rhinos, tigers, elephants or for that matter any other mammal, it would still be one of the best bird watching sites in India. But the truth is that it brims with rhinos, tigers, elephants and other mammals. In fact it has the largest population of one-horned rhinos (1,700) and one of the highest concentration of tigers in India and the world.

In fact, Kaziranga's conservation effort is an amazing success story. It all started way back in 1904 when Lady Curzon, wife of the Viceroy of India, visited the area in the hope of seeing

ABOVE: A magnificent specimen of the Asiatic one-horned rhino posing for the camera
RIGHT: A squirrel foraging on the branch of a tree





LEFT: Out on an elephant safari with calves in tow
BELOW: A wild elephant feeds on vegetation along the river bank

the rhino in its natural habitat but only got to see its pugmarks and little else: poachers had systematically killed the great beasts for their horns. At the time it was believed that only 12 rhinos remained in the forest. Saddened by the plight of the magnificent beast, she prevailed upon her husband to declare Kaziranga as a protected area.

In 1926, Kaziranga was declared a Reserve Forest, in 1940 a Wildlife

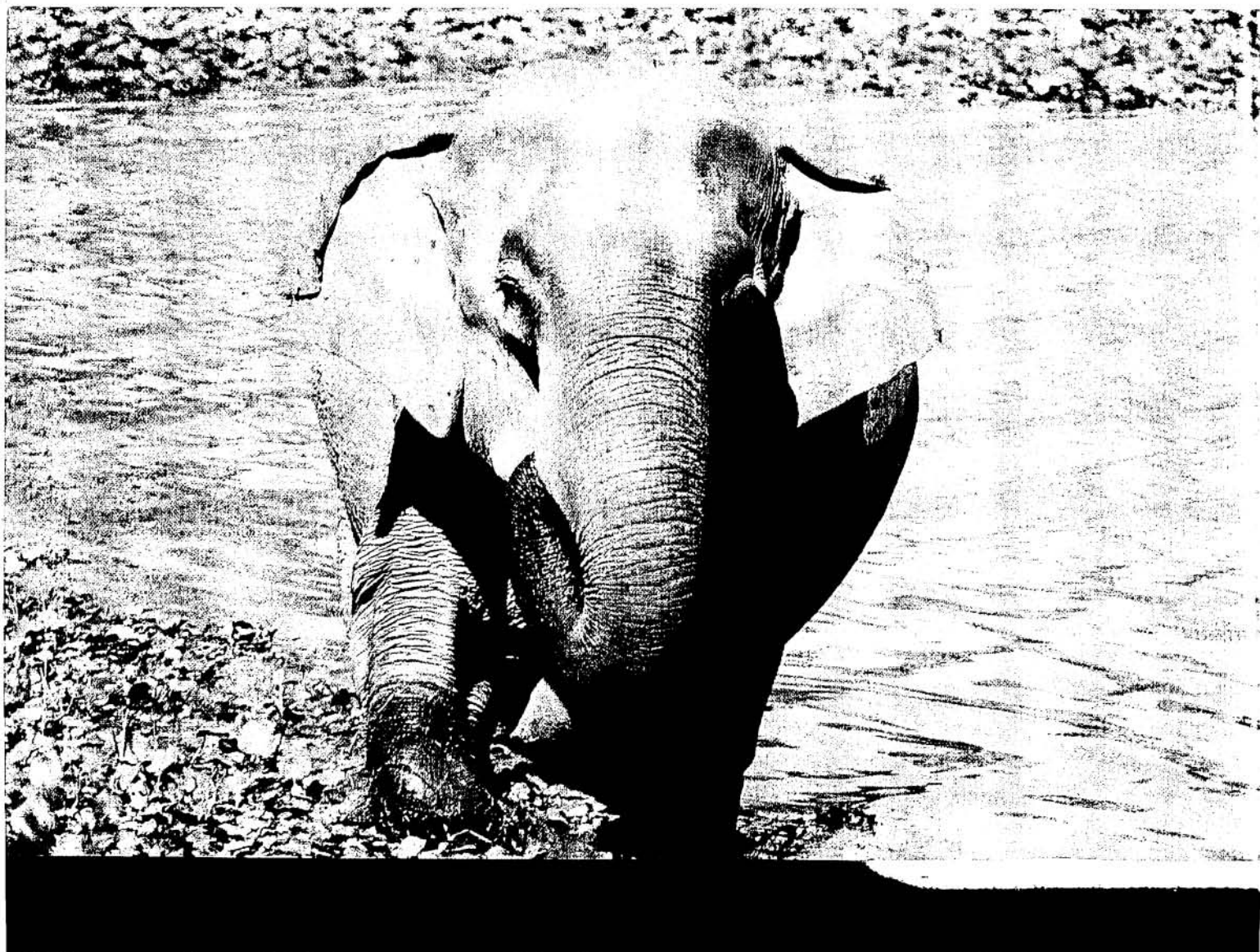
Sanctuary and soon after a National Park. According to Forest Department statistics, the rhino population touched 366 in 1966, 1,164 in 1993 and currently stands at over 1,700. In 1985, Kaziranga National Park was declared a United Nations World Heritage Site.

Though Kaziranga is technically not included in Project Tiger, the big cat has benefited by the protection it offers the rhino and currently the park

is believed to have the highest density of tigers in the world. Though we did not encounter a tiger during our safari, we did get to see its gruesome handiwork. The brown stump-like remains by the side of the road was a grim reminder that there was a dark side to this seemingly idyllic Garden of Eden, that the brutal laws of nature—the survival of the fittest—still prevailed.

By now the terrain had changed dramatically and the grasslands gave way to dense forests. We drove through deep silent forests that cast forbidding shadows across the thick undergrowth. For a while we drove parallel to the banks of the Brahmaputra river and admired the plumage of wild ducks that paddled past tortoises sunning on stumps protruding from the water.

Once the monsoons set in around the end of May, however, the placid



waters are transformed into torrential floods as the Brahmaputra swells and spreads itself like a giant all-consuming slug across the park. When this happens Kaziranga is closed to tourists for these are trying times for the rhinos and other residents of the park who must retreat to the surrounding highlands or risk being stranded on many temporary islands that emerge across the floodplains or, worse, drowning in the rising waters. Come October, when the monsoons and the floodwaters abate, the animals return to more hospitable habitat. It is also the time when the park reopens and tourists are welcome into animal paradise once again.

We emerged from the thick forest upon the grasslands once more and pulled up at an observation platform on which the flood levels over the years had been recorded in bright red strips. From here we gazed across the landscape: a rhino grazing on a sliver of land that projected into a shimmering lake; wild ducks paddling across the water in formations; egrets and storks frozen like statues in the water as they waited patiently to snap up fish from its surface; pelicans and other birds soaring across the sky overhead.

Kaziranga seemed to have draped herself in her finest gown to bid us farewell as we approached the end of our safari circuit. And just as we started to relax and share the wows of our sightings, she sprang a final surprise upon us with a herd of elephants grazing on water hyacinths a few metres from the dirt track. Upon seeing us the matriarch started to organise the retreat of her brood; the babies lined up in a single file, the youngest in the front and the older ones behind, as they marched off towards the thicket.

One greedy youngster lingered on to feed on the succulent vegetation only to earn the displeasure of the matriarch who trumpeted her discontent, a chilling, thrilling blast that reverberated across the wildlife park. The young elephant immediately responded to the warning and hurried

RIGHT: A pelican flies across a brilliant blue sky



F A C T F I L E

Jet Airways operates regular scheduled flights to Jorhat (96 km) and Guwahati (225 km).

The roads from Guwahati and Jorhat to Bokakhat, the closest town to Kaziranga National Park, are very well-maintained.

Assam Tourism (Tel: 037765 2662423 and 29, Guwahati: 0361-2547102, 2544475, 2542748) runs a number of lodges, including Aranya Lodge. Of the many private lodges, hotels and resort, Wild Grass Resort (e-mail: wildgrass@sancharnet.in) is the pick of the lot. All the lodges, hotels and resorts are located outside the park. Most will help arrange jeep and elephant safaris for their guests

Elephant safaris operate only during the early morning hours of the day. Reservations cannot be made in advance and may be made only in the evening prior to the day one plans to go on the safari. The duration of the safari is around 45 min and it allows one to get close to the rhino.

Jeep safaris are conducted in open vehicles. Most lodges will assist guests book private jeeps. Forest department guides and guards must accompany and be paid for by every vehicle that enters the park.

There are three safari trails within the park: Kohora or central range (the most popular one and the venue of the elephant safari) Agaratoli or eastern range (a bird paradise) and Bagori or western range.

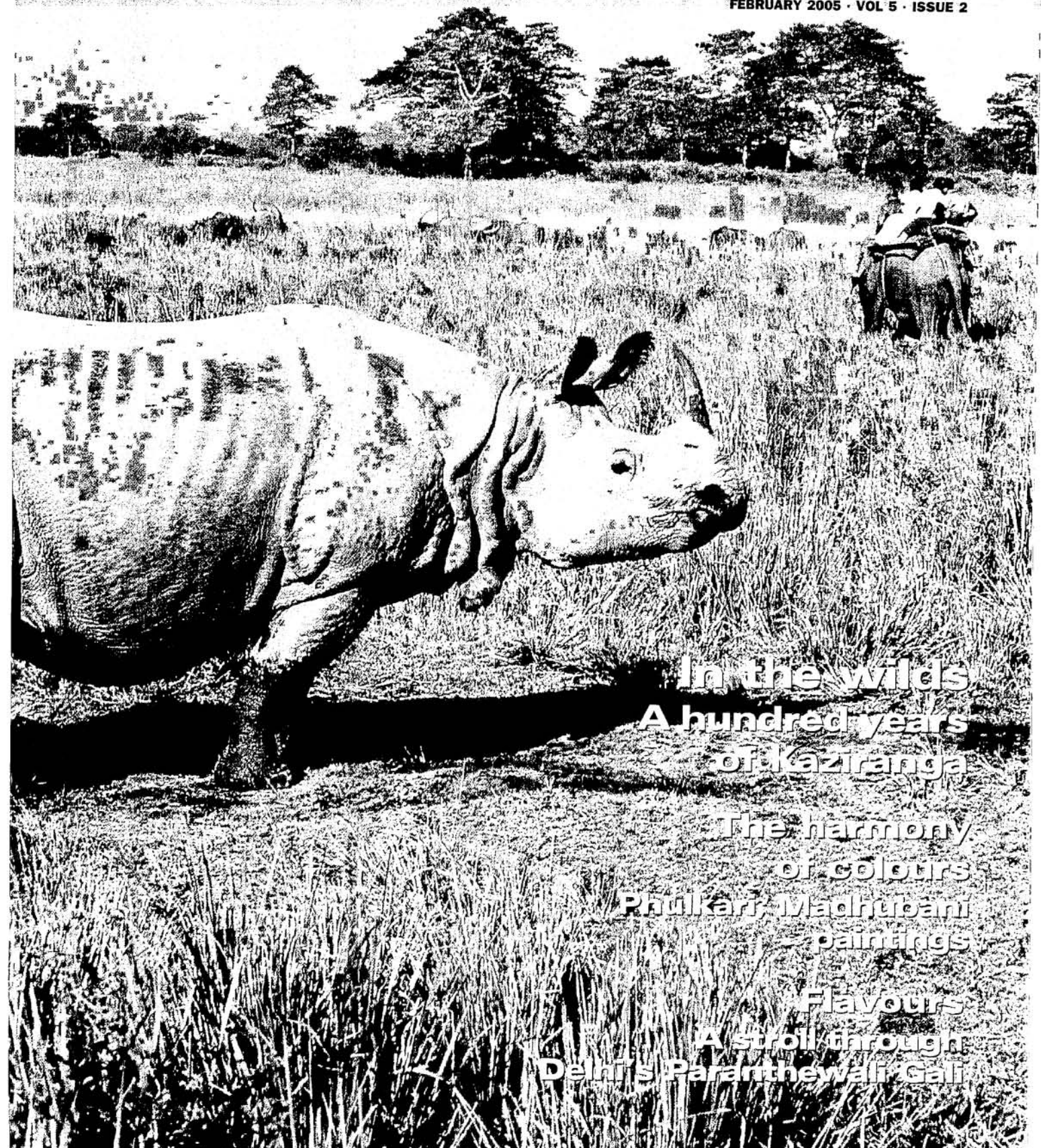
The park is closed during the monsoon months between May and October every year. The best time to visit the park is between February and April when the elephant grass is burnt and game viewing is at its best.

In February 2005 a special convention will be held at Kaziranga to launch the centenary celebrations of the National Park.

JETWINGS

FOR THE WELL-INFORMED TRAVELLER

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In the wilds
A hundred years
of Kaziranga

The harmony
of colours
Phulkari, Madhubani
paintings

Flavours
A stroll through
Delhi's Paranthewali Gali