

# Riches of the Wild

## *Land Mammals of South-East Asia*

EARL OF CRANBROOK

*With coloured plates by*  
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Prince Albert's spotted Rusa, in Panay Island, the Philippines.

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into the Pleistocene era (less than two million years ago). Since then, tapirs have vanished over enormous tracts of the world and now survive only in the tropical forests of South America and South-East Asia. Our one species, the Malayan tapir, is therefore of great interest as a relic of this once widespread group.

As an adult boldly patterned black and white (Plate 13) and, like all tapirs, brown with buffish spots and stripes as a young calf, the Malayan tapir feeds by browsing on a mixture of plants, mostly associated with forest gaps, disturbed or secondary growth. Tapirs tend to follow jungle trails. Their tracks and piles of dung (not unlike rhino droppings) show that



13. Tapirs wading in the upper River Sat, Taman Negara, Malaysia.

they travel long distances in all kinds of country, highland and lowland. In primary forest in Malaysia, movements of a radio-tagged male during five months covered 12.7 sq km, overlapping the ranges of others.

Archaeology, once again, has shown that the tapir was present in late Pleistocene Borneo and survived there to at least 6,000 years ago, if not until the recent past. There is no evidence that its extermination was due to prehistoric man; natural causes must have been effective. It is now in decline everywhere, but hunting and habitat loss are undoubtedly the main factors.

### *Rhinoceroses*

Archaeology has also shown that the Javan rhinoceros has disappeared from Borneo since about 12,000 years ago, evidently from natural causes. In Peninsular Malaysia, this species has proved most susceptible to modern pressures, having last been recorded in the 1930s. The present predicament of both rhinoceroses in South-East Asia is chiefly attributable to the high value attached to their horns, in particular, other bodily organs and even blood.

The trade in rhinoceros horn and other parts is ancient. The effects were already notable by the nineteenth century and became acute in the twentieth. In Borneo, a scientific expedition in 1893-4 to the upper Kapuas, West Kalimantan, found hunters active and no signs of rhino and, in 1937, after a prolonged visit to remote and once populous rhino country in the upper Trusan, Sarawak, E. Banks wrote: 'I saw only once a trace made about three years ago . . . every one of the many old wallows passed had the remains of a hut within a few hundred yards, and even on the highest peaks the wandering hunters had left their traces.'

It now seems shocking that in the early 1930s, when it was realized that the Javan rhinoceros might soon be extinct, an

expedition was mounted to shoot the last animals for museum specimens. Yet this happened in Perak in 1932, supported by the Game Department. Current debate centres on the merits of live-capture for zoos (and, with luck, captive breeding), as opposed to conservation in the wild. Meanwhile, one protected population of Javan rhinoceroses exists at Ujung Kulon, Java. Groups of Sumatran rhinoceroses survive in reserves including Gunung Leuser, Sumatra, and Taman Negara and Endau-Rompin, Malaysia. The total world population is thought to be less than 300. The problems of conservation are compounded by the large areas of habitat required: densities in primary forest tracts at Endau-Rompin vary from one Sumatran rhinoceros per 40 sq km to one per 120 sq km.

Of the two, the Javan is larger. Its skin bears a surface pattern of mosaic-like roughened thickenings and is folded into stiff, permanent creases. Three such folds cross the back, one before and one behind the shoulders and one over the rump. In the Sumatran rhinoceros, the skin folds are reduced and only two cross the spine, one over the fore-parts and one over the rump. The surface texture of the skin is granular, and it bears a sparse but even coat of short, stiff hairs. Some specimens, especially those in zoos, grow a patchy coat of shaggy hair, which may be tinged reddish brown; others are rubbed bare. On pieces of skin of a freshly killed wild Sumatran rhinoceros from Sabah, which I examined for forensic purposes, the hairs were black and blunt-ended, uniformly abraded to an even length.

Both rhinoceroses are browsers, feeding on a mix of foliage and fruit, particularly of plants associated with disturbed forest or secondary vegetation, such as *Macaranga* spp., *Mallotus* spp., *Artocarpus* spp. and figs. They are normally solitary and sedentary, but not territorial in so far as the home ranges of individuals may overlap. They make wallows in muddy ground, frequent mineral springs and deposit their dung at fixed points where large piles of their nodular droppings accumulate.

### Pigs

The pigs are the most successful ungulate group in the forested environments of South-East Asia. Representatives of the family are found throughout the region, including many islands; some island populations have been carried by man beyond their natural range. For many rural communities, wild pigs are the main source of mammalian meat in the diet. A study for World Wildlife Fund Malaysia in 1984-5, led by J. O. Caldecott, concluded that in Sarawak (state area 123,000 sq km, human population 1.3 million) about one million bearded pigs were killed and consumed each year, with 23,000 sambar and 31,000 barking deer. The combined annual value of this meat was M\$210 million at prevailing prices up-river, M\$320 million if replaced with domestic pork and beef. Similar figures would certainly be forthcoming if such calculations were repeated elsewhere. If properly managed, wild pigs and other game animals can be harvested on a sustainable basis and will then make a major recurrent contribution to rural economies.

All pigs have large heads with long, mobile snouts and powerful jaws equipped with upwardly curving canines and low-crowned molars. They are omnivorous ground-feeders, finding much of their food (animal and vegetable) by rooting in soft soil. Pigs have been called 'the gardeners of the forest'. No doubt, their digging turns and aerates the topsoil but, above a certain density, pigs can prevent the growth of tree seedlings and so interfere with the cycle of natural regeneration.

The most unusual pig is the long-limbed, sparsely haired babirusa, in which the upper canines are completely reversed and grow upwards from their bony sockets through the skin on each side of the snout, curving backwards towards the eyes (Figure 3). The babirusa occurs on Celebes and nearby islands, including Buru in the Moluccas where it may have been introduced. It has no obvious relative among other pigs of the region, all of which are of the one genus, *Sus*.