

Call of the wild

# Sanctuary

A S I A

50/-

Vol. XXV No. 1, February 2005

## SEASONS IN THE SUN

Birding in Kaziranga

## HERPETOLOGISTS' JOURNEY

## TSUNAMI MUSINGS

CRZ rules saved lives

## LOWER SUBANSIRI

# Kaziranga, pride of Assam

*100 years of conservation success*





**On the cover**

A vision from the past: E.P Gee on location in Kaziranga, a wilderness he loved and protected to the day he died. Image courtesy B.N.H.S

# Call of the wild Sanctuary

Vol. XXV No. 1, February 2005

A S I A

**Editor**

Bittu Sahgal

**Principal Advisor**

Ranjit Barthakur

**Managing Editor**

Miel Sahgal

**Assistant Editors**

Lakshmy Raman

Jennifer Scarlott

**Consulting Editor**

Ashish Fernandes

**Editorial**

Shivani Shah

Shyla Boga

**Design**

Umesh Bobade

**Advertising**

Shashi Kumar

**Circulation and Subscriptions**

P. Bhaskar

**Processing**

Jasra Graphics Pvt. Ltd.

**Printing**

Sel Print India Pvt. Ltd., Mumbai

**Distribution**

India Book House, Mumbai



*Sanctuary Asia* is printed and published 12 times a year (two editions) by Shashi Kumar. To submit articles or photographs, write to us for terms and guidelines (we cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited material). Reproduction in whole or part, electronically or in print, without prior written permission of the publisher is strictly prohibited. For back issues, contact the Subscription Department.

**Sanctuary Asia**

602, Maker Chambers V,  
Nariman Point,  
Mumbai 400 021.

Tel.: (91-22) 2283 0061/81

Fax: (91-22) 2287 4380

www.sanctuaryasia.com

E-mail: <mail@sanctuaryasia.com>

## 18 Kaziranga, Pride of Assam

The fabled Northeast of India has always been considered a treasure trove of biodiversity. And Kaziranga, which celebrates its centenary year, is probably one of the most visible symbols of India's natural heritage. This is also where the one-horned rhino was saved from almost sure extinction. In an age of dismal stories, this is a welcome conservation success.



## 34 Herpetologists' Journey

Romulus Whitaker writes of his experiences – the trials, tribulations, the fantastic field trips and exhilaration of putting together the 500-page book *Snakes of India*. A host of people were involved in creating this invaluable field guide. The author gives credit where it is due and shares with *Sanctuary* readers his own colourful involvement with snakes.



## 52 Damning our Wildlife

The Lower Subansiri Hydel Project in the Assam-Arunachal border subverts the letter and spirit of environmental governance in the country writes Neeraj Vaghholikar, who has been tracking the twisted clearance process and violations of conditions by this project for years. Apart from serious environmental and social concerns, critical wildlife habitats will be destroyed by this project.

## Contributors



**Maan Barua**

The Sanctuary-ABN AMRO Young Naturalist of the year 2004, he is already one of India's most respected bird experts. **28**



**S.G. Neginhal**

A retired IFS officer, he is the author of 'Forest trees of South India' and an excellent wildlife photographer. **40**



**Debi Goenka**

A green warrior in every sense of the word, he battles to protect our forests, coasts and open spaces on a daily basis. **48**



**Neeraj Vaghholikar**

A naturalist-conservationist with an abiding interest in social and development issues in Northeast India. **52**



COVER STORY

# Kaziranga, *Pride of Assam*

BY BITTU SÀHGAL



BERNARD CAMTELEIN





Excerpt from *'The Kaziranga Inheritance'*



*“Kaziranga is a child of the Brahmaputra river valley, which is in turn locked between the eastern Himalaya to the north and the ranges of Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, and Mikir, Cachar and Barail hills to the south. This climatic and geographic variation results in a special mix of plants and animals found almost nowhere else on Earth.”*

Ranjit Barthakur and I sat on a large log watching otters fish in the Diphloo river. We paused a while to take in the throb of life that is Kaziranga on the way back from Debeswari, where we had seen two Bengal Floricans rise and then float down like balloons, in a dance ritual designed to impress females hidden in the tall grass. We also saw where a tiger, elephant and turtle had left tell-tale foot prints when they crossed a dry sandy riverbed, no doubt at different times of the day.

Across the river from where we now sat in silence, two rhinos made a quick appearance and then vanished into their veiled grassland world. They were followed by a small herd of elephants whose trumpeting we heard long before they revealed themselves to us. A decidedly fishy smell and silvery scales strewn about the log suggested we were not far from the underground otters' holt. The whole of the Assam valley, the whole world was once this ordered, this peaceful, I thought to myself as I savoured the moment.

Ranjit was born in Assam and it was on his invitation that I first visited

Kaziranga almost a decade ago. Visiting and defending wild places has virtually become the purpose of my life, and I already knew pretty much all that had been written about Kaziranga before I reached, but nothing could possibly have prepared me for the aura of the grassland home of the Indian one-horned rhino.

From the earliest days of my involvement with wildlife in the 1970s, I had heard stories of the magnificent northeast from the likes of the late Dr. Salim Ali and Humayun Abdulali. I had also read E.P. Gee's 'Wildlife of India' from cover to cover. But sitting on that log and listening to Ranjit speak about 'his' world and hearing the slosh of rhinos and the yelping of otters filled me with Kaziranga in a way no book including this one could ever do.

For centuries, this hidden part of India, extending all the way to Myanmar, was saved from the plough and axe because of its sheer inaccessibility. "When most of India's wildlife has vanished, somewhere in the northeast a wood duck will still

be whistling," said Dr. Salim Ali to me once, commenting on a proposed manuscript for *Sanctuary*, the magazine I have edited for 25 years. He was not to know that in the decade after he passed away in 1987, this protective isolation would be shattered by a progressive series of roads, mines, dams and other human 'development' infrastructure that brought humans closer to the secret nooks and havens from where wild creatures were driven away to who knows where.

Speaking easily from knowledge born of years spent in the northeast, Ranjit told me about the 'Seven Sisters' – the political states of India into which the northeast has been divided – Assam, Arunachal, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. He spoke of their incredible biodiversity, their unique human cultures and their crucial biogeographic location on the cusp of the Indo-Malayan realm. "This river flowing gently by will turn into a raging torrent when the waters from the hills of Karbi Anglong come hurtling down just a month from now," he said.

*Otters communicate by smell and also calls and survive largely on fish. Three species of otters are found in India – the smooth-coated, Eurasian and small-clawed otter.*



KEDARBHIDE





*A charcoal silhouette of trees stands out against the setting sun in Kaziranga.*

Adding that the mighty Brahmaputra, on whose banks we sat earlier that morning, sipping a cup of black tea offered to us by a forest guard, would turn into an even more wild and untamed surge.

Kaziranga is a child of the Brahmaputra river valley, which is in turn locked between the eastern Himalaya to the north and the ranges of Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, and Mikir, Cachar and Barail hills to the south. This climatic and geographic variation results in a special mix of plants and animals found almost nowhere else on Earth.

Here within a 430 sq. km. grass and forest asylum that is protected like a fortress, alongside the rhino, a whole host of animals have found refuge. I said a silent prayer for all those farsighted people who lavished protection on Kaziranga's untamed wilderness down the ages. And I hoped Kaziranga's progress from a reserved

forest to game sanctuary, to wildlife sanctuary, then national park and World Heritage Site, would continue in the days ahead to include the hill ranges of Karbi Anglong, where wild animals were once able to go to escape the high flood. The park authorities have been working on such 'additions' for several years now and their greatest support for this endeavour now comes from the people of Assam for whom



*The warm and inviting Wild Grass Lodge, which marries hospitality with conservation.*

Kaziranga is a symbol of both pride and culture.

Like a moth to a benign flame, I have returned time and again to Kaziranga over the years only to discover a new facet, a new personality, with each successive trip. No one can be unimpressed with the sight of rhinos, wild buffaloes, elephants, swamp deer and gibbons. This is what 50,000 people visit Kaziranga each year to see. But I do sometimes wish they could be persuaded to turn their attention to some of the less obvious delights on offer. From where I sat next to the otters' holt, for instance, I noticed a preying mantis on a very low bush, no doubt attracted to the possibility of snapping up a fly or two from the hundreds buzzing around the remnants of the otters' fish meal. Watching over its waterways, from a vantage point on a fig tree near us, a Greyheaded Fish Eagle screamed its domination over its domain, as if to remind us that there was more and





ANSHI KADIBETRA

*Boats are crucial to the protection of Kaziranga, not just during the monsoon but throughout the year. Guards use boats to patrol even very shallow swamps where walking is both difficult and dangerous.*

then still more to Kaziranga than first meets the eye.

When we reached Wild Grass, the residential lodge that Ranjit and A.K. (Manju) Barua had co-founded in a village just outside Kaziranga in the late 1980s, I learned still more about Assam, Kaziranga and its life-loving people from lodge managers, caretakers and staff—all Assamese, all friendly, all fiercely proud of and protective about Kaziranga.

Poaching had once almost wiped out the rhino and stopping poachers and managing the habitat to ensure that the grasslands so crucial to the survival of the rhino now occupied the vast bulk of the time and resources available to the field staff of Kaziranga.

As he shifted easily between Assamese and English, I listened on as the soft-spoken Bhupen Talukdar, then a Forest Ranger at Kaziranga, described the monumental task they had on hand. Shorn of romance and niceties, every single day that they entered the rhino's domain, their life was at risk. I learned more about wildlife protection from him, Pankaj Sharma and D. Boro in the five days of my first trip to Kaziranga than I had in years of strategy sessions involving city conservationists, lawyers and officials.

Something they were doing in Kaziranga was not just right, but remarkable. Even as rhinos were being exterminated by poachers in the Manas Tiger Reserve, the numbers of this ancient mammal were on the rise in Kaziranga.

And that was not all. Following the sage advice of stalwarts such as Stracey, Milroy, Miri, Gee and later Lahan and Deb Roy, they had managed to protect the geographical integrity of the largest representative of the Brahmaputra flood plain grassland, swamp and forest habitat. Nature responded to their efforts by 'rewarding' managers with the highest density of tigers per square kilometre found anywhere in the world. Birds too seemed to 'approve' and began to congregate each year in greater numbers

on this wild and inviting piece of land that was located at the intersection of both the Australasian and the Indo-Asian flyways. We met young Maan Barua, an ornithologist dedicated to Kaziranga's protection. The future of the park lies in the hands of young people like him.

The field staff of Kaziranga were mandated to "maintain and wherever necessary, restore the demographic features relating to the populations of all endangered, endemic, vulnerable, rare species of animals and plants with special focus on rhino, tiger and their habitat." They did this and more. In the process they have earned for themselves the well-deserved reputation for having implemented the most successful conservation initiative on the subcontinent in the past 100 years. 🐘



BERNARD CASTELLEN

*A black-capped langur found in dense deciduous and evergreen forests, defies gravity high above the ground. The health of the canopy is vital to the survival of these primates.*