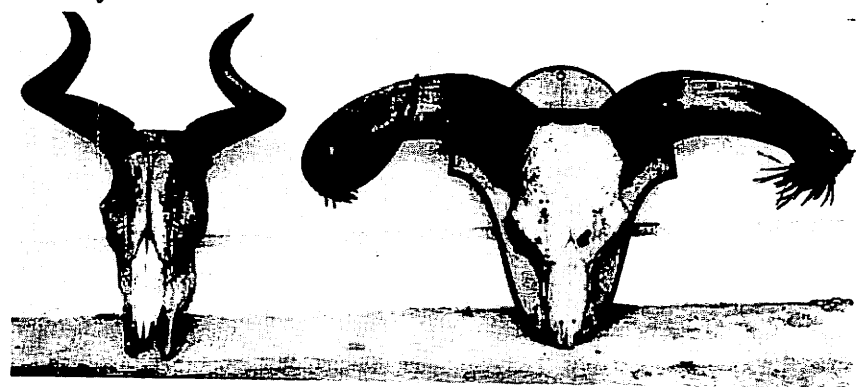


KOUPREY CLUES & RHINO NEWS

By Harvey C. Neese

Aided by a New York Zoological Society grant, Harvey Neese investigated the status of two of the rarest animals in the world — the kouprey and the Javan rhino — in southern Laos and northern Cambodia



In November 1974 I settled in the town of Pakse, in southern Laos, to look for the very rare wild cattle, the kouprey (*Bos sauveli*) in south Laos and along the Cambodian border. Later, my two Lao assistants would also search for the almost equally rare Javan rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*).

My assistants, whom I shall call Suwan and Khong, would be my eyes and ears as they travelled on both sides of the civil war boundaries in Laos and Cambodia. As a foreigner I would certainly have been captured or killed had I ventured into areas controlled by the Pathet Lao or the Khmer Rouge.

I tried to convince my two assistants that most information they would receive would be false or, at best, the truth stretched. They were told to look out for small details that would suggest whether the informant knew what he was talking about — and to pay particular attention to descriptions, as both the animals we searched for had notable body characteristics.

Many villages were visited during the seven-month search. And dozens upon dozens of people were contacted. We tried to concentrate on either hunters or village notables, thinking that in this way more direct information could be obtained.

I travelled to villages near Pakse (Sedone Province) and around Khong Island (Sithandone Province) where I talked to hunters and village heads. I was limited to these areas because of the poor security elsewhere. Suwan, who conducted most of the work searching for the kouprey, spent considerable time south of Ban Sot (east of Khong Island and just north of the Cambodia border, see map).

One visit to Ban Sot in about our sixth week brought Suwan into contact with a hunter who related to him how his partner had shot at a *ngua pho* bull (and missed) in June 1974. The herd apparently consisted of 10 cows and several calves along with the bull. Because the sighting was in June it would mean that kouprey cows would most likely have young calves by their sides. His description of the large dewlap 'that almost touched the ground' and the peculiar curvature of the horns convinced Suwan that the hunter knew what a kouprey looked like (few people did).

This hunter's name for the kouprey — *ngua pho* (pronounced 'paw') — is less commonly used than *ngua baa*. It is, however, used by hunters familiar with the animal, and in areas which it frequents. Few if any Laos in other areas were familiar with this term.

Then a noted hunter from the village of Ta Uak in Sithandone Province told Suwan that he had seen 15 to 20 kouprey in 1971 near a group of mineral licks and ponds on the Laotian side of the border. He offered to take him to the area

and show him kouprey tracks — or better yet, a herd of animals.

On his next trip Suwan accompanied the hunter on a six-day expedition. The hunter showed Suwan the ponds and mineral licks he had spoken of earlier, and pointed out three different kinds of wild cattle tracks which he said were banteng, gaur, and kouprey.

During their expedition (which took place in February 1975) the hunter confided to Suwan that he had actually shot a bull kouprey the previous June near one of the mineral licks. The kouprey had then apparently run across the border into Cambodia, and a few months later the hunter had seen where the animal had died from its wounds. Why the man did not tell this story at their earlier meeting is not clear, though he may have thought that Suwan was actually working for some government department and might cause him trouble. According to Suwan there were more wild cattle tracks in this area than he had ever seen before. During their trip the two men saw a contingent of Khmer Rouge soldiers patrolling the Cambodian side of the border, but fortunately the soldiers didn't spot them.

More than one hunter claimed that the area south and west of Kompong Sra Lau (in Cambodia) and just north of the border in Laos had the most kouprey. One former high government official who was familiar with Dr Wharton's expeditions in Cambodia in search of kouprey said he had himself hunted them in previous years in the Kompong Sra Lau area.

Another hunter from near the Xe Lam Phao river west of Khong Island said he saw more kouprey than banteng in this area. He said he hunted with a dog, and claimed he was able to shoot six kouprey in one day from one herd. The dog followed the herd and brought the bull to bay, while the cows and calves looked on from a distance. The hunter approached with the barking dog, thus keeping the animal off guard. In this way he was able to get close enough to shoot his six animals.

Our search for the kouprey was centred in the area south of Ban Sot, south-east of Ta Uak, and west of Kompong Sra Lau along the border. Hunters who were interviewed generally agreed that kouprey moved across into Laos at certain times of the year for water, mineral licks, or better grazing. But they were, however, more numerous in Cambodia. There are no insurmountable physical barriers to prevent their crossing, and of course wild animals do not recognise political borders.

These various accounts are examples of the kind of feed-back that Suwan got from his travel along the border area. He never did see any kouprey himself. The grass was still high during the period of his search, which would have made

it difficult to see a herd even at close range, but the many fresh tracks he saw convinced us that these were areas frequented by large numbers of wild cattle.

Most of the time between November 1974 and May 1975 was spent looking for kouprey. Only towards the end did we look for rhinos — and in fact we were not really interested until the mounting number of reports we received suggested that this species did still exist in Laos. Suwan and Khong were both involved in this search, and we found that areas suspected of harbouring rhinos were sometimes quite close to kouprey territory. This may seem strange because the kouprey and the Javan rhino prefer quite different habitats. But in south Laos grassy plains are sometimes found right next to thickly forested, mountainous regions that are almost impenetrable. So plains and forest animals do live more or less side by side.

Many tribal groups in Laos consider rhino hunting to be taboo. They believe that rhinos have powerful *phi* or evil spirits, which, if they are interfered with, can wreak terrible vengeance on a hunter or his family. For this reason it was hard to obtain detailed information about rhinos from these people. But it also adds significance to the few facts we were able to coax from the villagers.

The most important events of our rhino search were two incidents involving separate hunting parties of twenty-six and nine Laos; both groups reported to Suwan that they had seen rhinos.

The twenty-six villagers from Ban Kala in Sedone Province were rounding-up wild elephants quite near their village in June 1974. As the circle of hunters closed on five elephants they found that along with the elephants there were two rhinos as well. Both rhinos and three of the wild elephants eventually escaped — but the leader of the hunt died shortly afterwards and the villagers claimed that the sighting of the two rhinos was the cause of his death.

The second incident involved nine hunters from Boun Tai in Sithandone Province, and also took place in 1974. The men were sitting on a tree platform somewhere east of Ban Kok Padek (just across the Cambodian border), waiting for an elephant to visit a mineral lick below their tree. During the moonlit night an animal did come to the lick, but they couldn't tell what it was. It had no trunk, however, so they felt sure it was not an elephant.

The next morning they climbed down from their platform and found tracks very similar to those of an elephant though considerably smaller. They knew then that what they had seen was a rhino. Before the hunt was over, one of the men was killed and another wounded by Khmer soldiers. This bolstered their belief that

