

# ***Nepal - Looking for rhinos with an elephant***

By Mark Stachiew

I clung to the back of the elephant. It wasn't comfortable, but the gently swaying grey bulk I was sitting on made me feel safe from the dangers I imagined lurking in the jungle.

A friend and I were perched on the back of an elephant in Royal Chitwan National Park in southern Nepal. We were hoping to catch a glimpse of the endangered Indian one-horned rhinoceros.

Our hearts pounded in anticipation as our mount lumbered its way through the dew-soaked forest. Our guide looked disinterested as he sat astride the elephant's neck. He steered the animal by kicking the back of its ears with his bare feet and would occasionally scan the ground for any signs of a rhinoceros. When he saw something interesting on the ground, he would command his elephant to stop by whacking a wooden goad on the back of its fuzzy head. Usually, the guide would look down then shrug his shoulders and murmur something unintelligible in Nepali.

The early morning sun shone feebly through the February mist which enshrouded the forest. Our guide was well wrapped with a large blanket while we clutched our cameras with one hand and the elephant with the other. All the while, we were being drenched as our mount brushed against the cold dew which coated the leaves of the forest. We wandered through the grassy fields and wet forests for several hours without seeing any evidence of rhinos and were growing weary of the search. Every once in a while, the elephant would scare up a jungle fowl and it would fly off into the forest, screeching. We often saw the shadowy silhouettes of spotted deer as they darted out of our way and we even saw a fox skulking across the fields, but the rhinos remained elusive.

We had been at it for about three and a half hours and were beginning to feel the pain caused by straddling an elephant. The sun was starting to burn off the fog and the guide was getting fed up. There were two other elephants loaded with tourists ambling off towards the nearby village

of Sauraha and our guide decided to follow them back. We were disappointed that we never had the chance to use our cameras.

As our convoy of elephants headed back, our guide spotted something on the ground and he became excited. He said something to one of the other guides and they urged their mounts towards the river's edge. Our guide followed a trail that was plain to him, but Invisible to us.

Our elephant thundered through the heavy jungle growth which lined the swampy edges of the river. Suddenly, we saw a grey shape crashing by. "Look, rhino!" shouted our guide. The clatter of our camera shutters erupted in the morning stillness as we took blurry photos of a rhino's back hidden in a forest of leaves.

The rhinoceros wasn't pleased by our presence and crashed back into the forest. Our guide sped after him and one of the other elephants followed us. We tracked our quarry to a clearing and discovered an entire family of rhinos, a male and female and a young one. We blasted off more photos, but once again all we managed to capture were a batch of fuzzy shots of rhino eyes and ears hidden by the plants. Our guide knew we were after good pictures, so he tried to maneuver the elephant into a better position.

The rhinos were still agitated by our presence, but they weren't running away from us. They just remained hidden. We were frustrated because they were so close and yet we could barely see them.

Just as I had taken my umpteenth photo of a rhino's back, the curious baby rhino peeked his head out to get a better look at us. My camera was pointing right at him as I saw the rising sun glinting in the corner of his eye. I stared at his wrinkled grey face with its tiny horn for what seemed like hours, but he was only there long enough for me to take one picture, then he darted back into the jungle.

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