

I HAD known him probably longer than any other person, and I well remember the first time I met him.

It was on an April day in 1939, and I had taken two friends to visit the Kaziranga Wild Life Sanctuary in Assam. We were shown around by none other than M. C. Miri, the able Assistant Conservator of Forests who, under the direction of the famous A. J. W. Milrow, had cleared Kaziranga of pit-digging poachers and saved the Indian rhino from certain extermination.

We were charged that day by another rhino, and our elephants fled some distance before being persuaded by their mahouts to resume the journey. But this loss of face on the part of our elephants and ourselves was later redeemed when we were leaving the sanctuary. Near the boundary we encountered this large bull. He dwelled, we were told, in solitary exile and had come to be called

He was on  
near-friendly terms  
with hundreds of people,  
but he never escaped  
the threats  
of his own kind

# The Most Famous Rhino

By E. P. GEE

*All photos by the author*

*Drawing by Margaret Colbert*



the Boorra Goonda. Miri told us the animal's story and pointed out to us an old wound on his plated hind quarters.

"It might even be safe to dismount and approach on foot," said Miri, and we lost no time in following his suggestion. I was covered on one side by Miri and on the other by one of my friends. Both men carried rifles for self-protection, though the practice has long since been discontinued in Kaziranga. I walked cautiously toward the Boorra Goonda and was able to take a motion picture of him at a range of about ten yards. He stopped grazing, glared with resentment in my direction, and then resignedly turned away. We felt elated at our bravery, and—more important—we had saved face for both our elephants and ourselves.

From that time onward there are many entries in the Visitors' Book referring to the Boorra Goonda and

the distances to which visitors approached him. As the years rolled on and the Boorra Goonda became perceptibly older and feebler, the distances came to be measured in feet instead of yards.

There was still the spark of life in the old rhino. I remember on the morning of January 8, 1950, I arrived at the edge of the sanctuary and was told that the Boorra Goonda and a large cow rhino had been close together at that very spot a few minutes earlier. The bull had moved off before I came, but the cow was still there. Later it turned out that the two had remained together for several days after that.

The Boorra Goonda was not the only old bull rhino exiled to the fringe of the sanctuary. There have usually been several others living at various places; and only several months ago the Divisional Forest Officer and I, while visiting the northern boundary near the

Brahmaputra River, christened a similar old bull—with a different name. The Boorra Goonda himself became so well known because he chanced to live in the locality where visitors to the sanctuary normally enter and depart, the so-called Kohora Grazing.

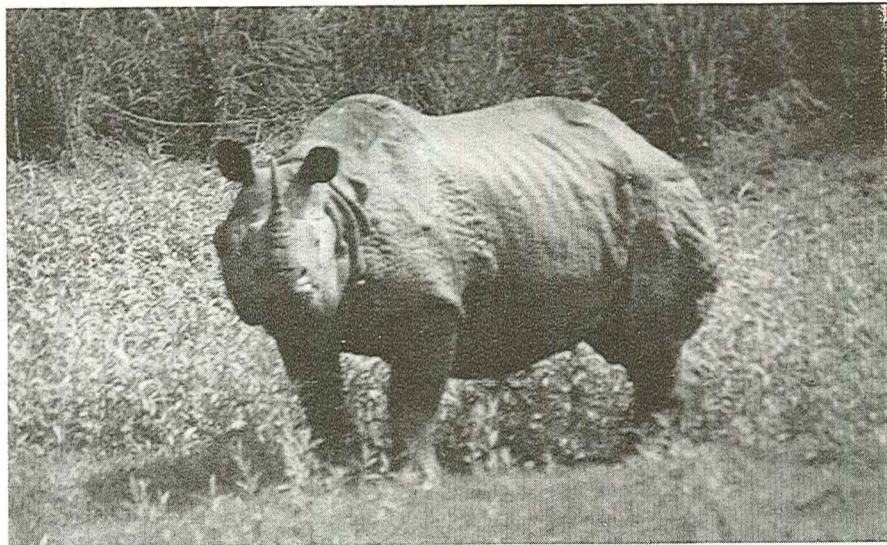
There is little doubt that these solitary old bulls have become exiles because they have been driven out of the sanctuary by the other bulls. The Boorra Goonda was in constant fear of encountering another bull rhino. He therefore sought refuge on the fringe of the sanctuary near human habitation, where domestic buffaloes and cattle were herded.

I have often observed him grazing in front of me, in spite of the presence of the elephants and myself. Suddenly he would lift his head and prick his large piggy ears in the direction of the far-off sound of something approaching through the long grass. Trembling with ap-

▼ VISITORS on elephant back sometimes saw him wearing water hyacinths, accidentally acquired in a lake







◀ SOMETIMES he looked like charging, but he never did

prehension, he would stand, ready to move away instantly if another rhino appeared. His fears were not without good reason. On his shoulders, flanks, and hindquarters were bleeding or half-healed gashes inflicted by his own kind—signs of nature's inexorable law of the survival of the fittest.

The extraordinary thing is that the Boorra Goonda loyally refused to leave the sanctuary where his calfhood and maturity had been spent. Every day he would leave the perils of the sanctuary for the less-dangerous and similar country outside—but only for a few hours. He would then recross the stream that forms the boundary at this place and re-enter the sanctuary, in spite of the danger of almost certain onslaught from other rhinos.

On one occasion, I took a friend on elephantback in search of the Boorra Goonda to photograph him. As we moved in silence through the tall elephant grass where the Boorra Goonda was usually to be found, we heard the crashing noise of a rhino rushing away in alarm. Later we came in view of the Boorra Goonda in full flight; but when he saw us, he immediately resumed grazing, allowing us to

approach to within a few yards. Sometimes he actually approached the Forest Elephants as they were taking visitors around the sanctuary. It is certain that he came to know these elephants and probably also the mahouts, who always called out friendly greetings and inquiries after his health.

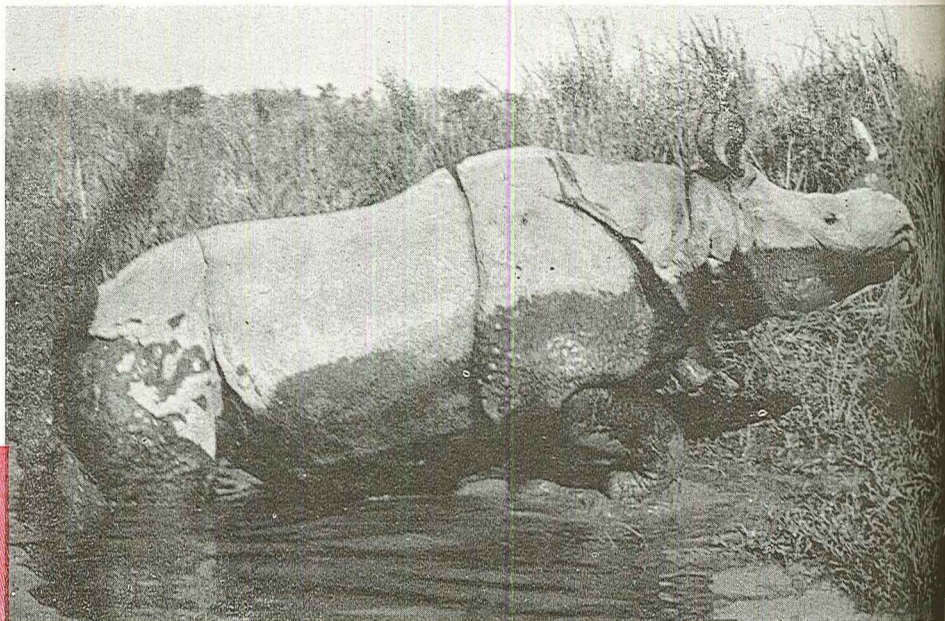
Trained elephants are ordinarily scared at the very sight of a rhino and have only one impulse—to flee as quickly as possible. A full-grown tusker elephant is no exception, and I have been on the back of one on several occasions when it fled from a rhino. But the Forest Elephants have usually had their schooling and morale-building with the non-aggressive Boorra Goonda, and

their introduction to him has always been a morally satisfying event. He has enabled them at least to become familiar with the sight and smell of one of these strange, one-horned, armor-plated, prehistoric-looking creatures.

For many years now the first question put by mahouts and visitors on arriving at the fringe of the sanctuary has been, "Where is the Boorra Goonda?" And if the herd-boys answered in the affirmative, the party would move off in the direction indicated, to find the old rhino lying in a favorite muddy wallow or peacefully grazing on some lush grass near a *jheel* (small lake) or stream.

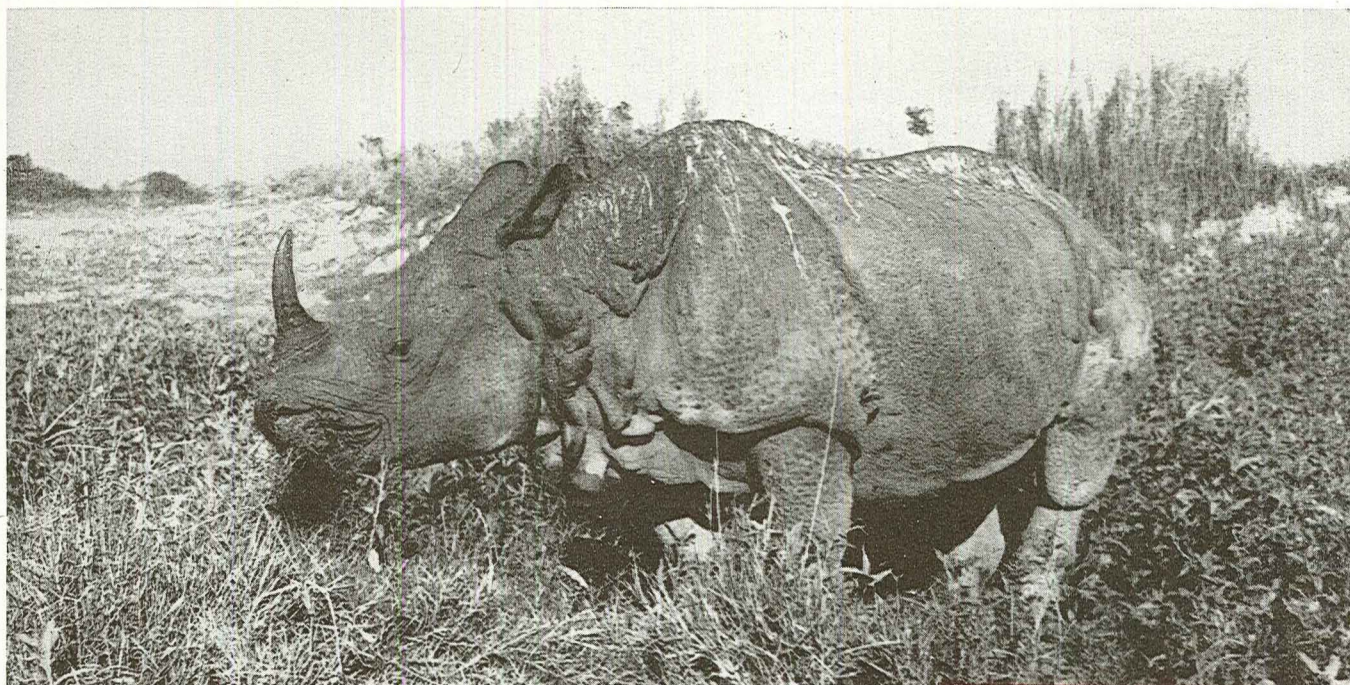
"How old is the Boorra Goonda?" No one has been able to answer this; but as several of his species have lived for over 40 years in captivity, and as the old age of the Boorra Goonda was prolonged over a period of at least fourteen years, it is possible that he lived as long as an Indian elephant, whose span is believed by some to be as much as three score years and ten.

"How is it that the Boorra Goonda was never shot and put



➤ LEAVING his favorite wallow, like an animated tank from an earlier era





out of his misery by the Forest Department?" The answer is that, apart from being an asset to the sanctuary and an attraction to visitors, he was not apparently in great discomfort or pain. Several times I saw him looking much the worse for being buffeted by some younger bull; and, as Honorary Forest Officer of the sanctuary, I would be on the verge of recommending that he be shot. But the next time I would see him, he would be looking very much fitter and be definitely still enjoying life.

"Why did no poacher ever kill him for his meat and horn?" It is true that his meat and horn were worth some Rs3000/(\$632) on the open market, but two main factors ensured his safety. Firstly, there was the deterrent of his being a protected animal, with a penalty of imprisonment up to six months, or a fine up to Rs1000/(\$211) or both. And secondly, there was the fact that he was so well known to all and so much of a character.

"Why did no tiger prey on him?" Tigers appear to be afraid of rhinos. There are cases of a tiger killing a rhino calf, and a case in the last century of two tigers together attacking a rhino that had previously been disabled by a rifle shot, but no tiger has ever been known to attack an adult rhino. In

view of this, the Indian rhino might well be styled the "King of Beasts."

On June 8 of last year, the famous Boorra Goonda—the old bull that had been admired and photographed by so many—died peacefully of old age. But he has a successor. "*Le Roi est mort. Vive le Roi!*" Some seven months earlier, another oldish bull rhino appeared in the same locality that had been the Boorra Goonda's for so long. The new arrival had obviously also been ousted from the sanctuary by his juniors and betters. He had a gash on his nose, three wounds on his flank, and a vertical tear in one ear, which caused him to be called Kan Katta ("Cut Ear"). He was in about the same condition of age and health as the Boorra Goonda was when I first saw him fourteen years ago.

I am glad that I was able to meet the Boorra Goonda and photograph him—for the last time—just a few months before he died. On a Sunday at the end of February, I went down to Kaziranga and found him near his favorite stream. The Range Officer was with me, and we crossed the stream to within a few yards of him. The Range Officer held out some grass in his hand at a distance of about nine feet, but the Boorra Goonda was not interested.

▲ EXTREME AGE slowed him down, but he continued to enjoy the pastures of his protectorate—perhaps even the human visitors

Then, facing him, I walked up with my camera to within eight feet of his head. Occasionally he glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, but he continued to graze with unconcern. Later, when he moved away, he walked very slowly—without a limp and with no wounds showing, but very slowly. I remember thinking that he appeared to be in no pain but that he was not far from the end.

The Kan Katta is there as a successor. But the Boorra Goonda will be sadly missed. He will be missed by the graceful egrets and the neat jungle mynahs which so frequently perched on his back in search of food. He will be missed by the villagers and herdboys of the locality, by the Forest Staff and the mahouts, and even by the Forest Elephants.

The memory of this fine old rhino will linger long in the minds of those who have seen him pushing his way through the tall green elephant grass, or peacefully grazing on the short lush growth of the open spaces, or lying among the water hyacinths of the *jheels* or in the muddy wallows of his native Kaziranga, where he lived so long.