

Animals

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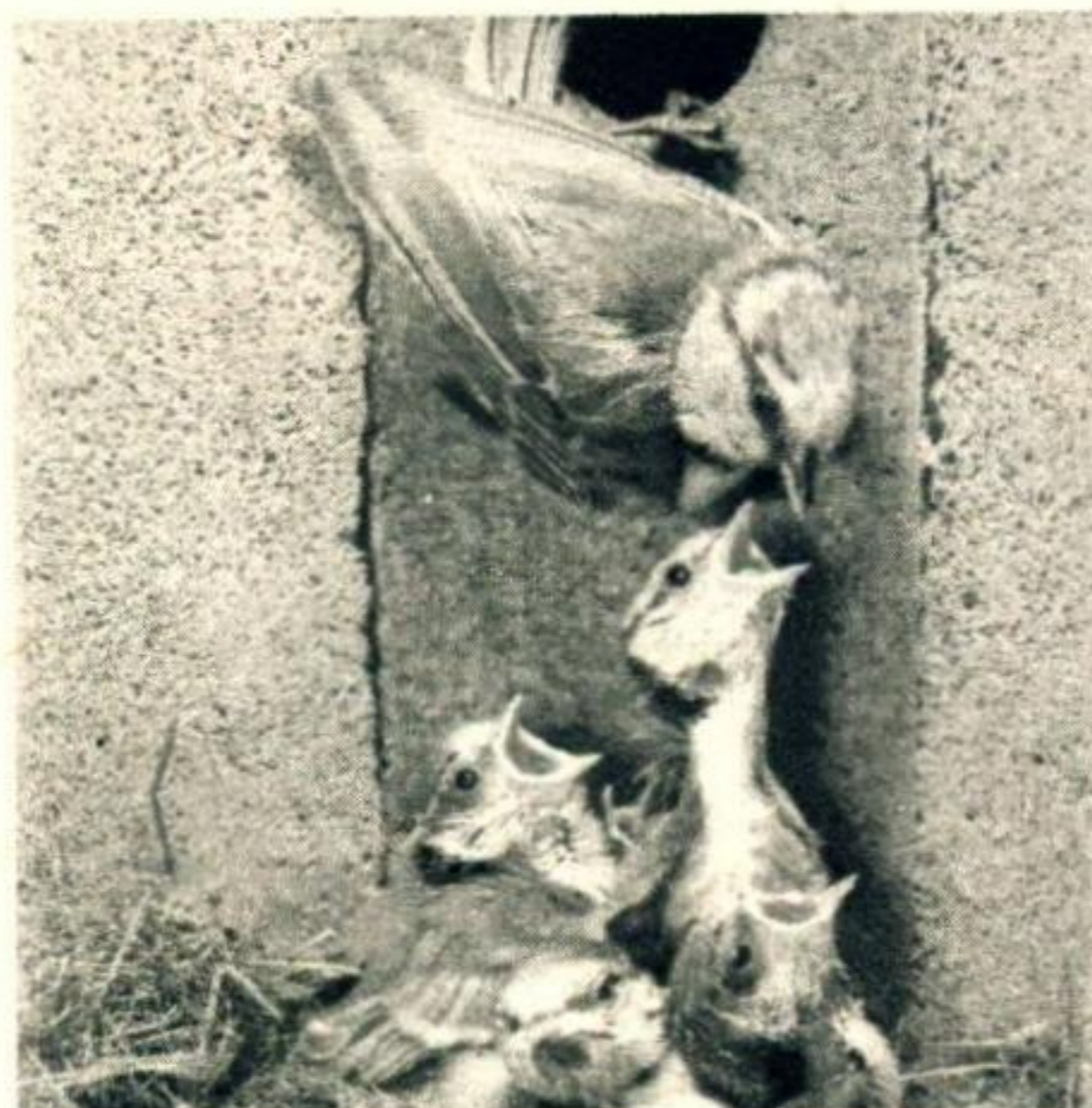


ALL ABOUT DINGOES

by Dal Stevens
—see page 623

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cover picture

Blue tits breed throughout the whole of Europe, except in the north, and May is undoubtedly the busiest time of the year for the parents. Usually there are twice the number of young seen here (normal egg clutch 7-14). The nest is always in a hole or cavity of some kind—most often in a tree, wall, or building. And blue tits are among the most frequent tenants of nest-boxes.

Photo: Hildegard Wolf

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CHASED BY A RHINO!



THE WILD LIFE OF INDIA

In this extract from his new book

The Wild Life of India

E. P. Gee talks about

the Indian rhinoceros and elephant

in general — and about one

rhinoceros and one elephant

he remembers in particular

A CURIOUS THING about the Indian rhinoceros living in the Kaziranga Sanctuary is that the old animals, particularly the bulls, on reaching a stage at the end of their life when they can no longer defend themselves against stronger ones, often 'retire' to the edge of the sanctuary. They then sometimes live for years close to where villagers provide a certain amount of protection for them, because younger rhino will not venture outside the sanctuary in such a manner. These old rhino usually carry the ugly gashes of conflict when they first come; and later on become a welcome tourist attraction because if no rhino can be seen in the sanctuary, a visitor can generally be certain of finding one of these old ones which can be approached very closely.

Perhaps the most famous of these old half-tame rhino was the *boorra goonda*, which was admired and photographed at close quarters by many thousands of visitors during the 14 years he lived outside the entrance to Kaziranga. I once photographed him from the ground at a distance of only 9 feet from his nose with impunity, much to the disappointment of a certain professional TV cameraman who was hoping for a charge—at my expense!

The *boorra goonda* ('big old bull' in Assamese) died a peaceful and natural death in 1953, and was much missed by all. But his place was soon taken by another 'ousted' bull called *kan katta* or 'cut ear'.

A number of rhino have been sent from Kaziranga to zoological gardens in different parts of the world for exhibition to the public. Among the very first were Mohan (in 1947) and Mohini (in 1952) which went to Whipsnade. I assisted in the arrangements and care of these two young animals from the time of their capture to their loading in the planes which flew them to Britain.

Rhino are captured by the pit system. A pit about 10 feet long, 5 feet wide, and 6 feet deep is dug in the middle of a much-used rhino path, and then thinly covered with sticks and grass to camouflage it. A rhino, sometimes a calf walking in front of its mother, falls and is later removed to a wheeled cage dragged by an elephant to a stockade, where it stays for about a month before being taken to its final destination. This is all done scientifically and humanely by experienced men of the Forest Department.

When first captured, a rhino, like a newly caught wild elephant, will display a wildness and apparent ferocity which has to be seen to be believed. This is because it suddenly finds itself in a position in which it has never previously been and in which its freedom of movement is totally restricted. It is purely due to fear, and this is proved by the fact that newly captured rhino and elephants become remarkably tame within a few days. Once they find that they are being well treated, their fear quickly disappears. I will always remember how Mohini, a baby rhino, after a very short spell of savagery, became devotedly docile and used to lick my hands whenever possible!

Mohan and Mohini at Whipsnade and the pair at Basle in Switzerland have successfully reared two and three calves respectively, and have provided us with much valuable information about their breeding habits. This information is of particular use when interpreted in the light of what can be observed in the wide open spaces of Kaziranga.

For instance we know that when we see one adult rhino chasing another, it is probably not a case of a stronger bull pursuing a weaker one, or of a bull trying to catch up with a cow. It is almost certainly a cow in season running after a 'reluctant' bull! A cow rhino comes into season once every 46 to 48 days throughout the year, unless she is served by a bull. Bull rhino are also believed to have periods when they are 'in rut', and the 'seasons' of both cow and bull must coincide before mating can take place. The gestation period is 16½-16½ months. A rhino probably lives as long as an elephant, about 70 years, though as yet we have no proof.

RHINO can be very dangerous, and every year a few people get killed by them. Because of this danger, visitors are not allowed to dismount from their riding-elephants in the sanctuary, but being a person not without some experience and an Honorary Forest Officer I have always been given some latitude by a co-operative Forest Department.

The first occasion was when I was determined to secure one or two steady cine shots of a rhino in an open place. An elephant is a most unsteady form of transport to do cine photography from. Accordingly when I reached a small dried-up lake where a large bull rhino was grazing on the short grass, I signalled to the *mahout* to stop and make the elephant kneel down. Then I and a man whom I had brought to assist me with photographic equipment dismounted and cautiously approached the rhino on foot with the cine camera on its tripod.

When I got within 'shooting' range, I placed the tripod in position and started to film the rhino, which was now slowly coming straight towards me. I sent the man back to the elephant, while I continued to film the oncoming beast at a closer range. As soon as the rhino more than filled the frame of the view-finder, I thought it was time for me to quit. There was no time to take the camera and tripod with me.

As I was nearing the elephant, I turned round to look back. There was the rhino closely examining my camera. I mounted the elephant the usual way by standing on its bent hind legs and climbing up the rope under its tail, and there was the rhino still very interested in my camera. It occurred to



Indian elephant and calf

me that if it had known anything at all about how to use a cine camera it could easily have obtained a very good shot of a man hurriedly scrambling on to the back of a frightened and trumpeting elephant!

The other occasion when I approached rhino on foot was while I was trying to photograph a pair of Pallas's fishing eagles at their nest high up in an Indian silk-cotton tree in Kaziranga. I had built a hide about 40 feet up in another nearby tree, situated so as to make the best use of the morning sun from about 8.30 am to 9.30 am. As there was usually a rhino of rather unpredictable temperament living in that neighbourhood, I had asked for an elephant to take me and my two men out there each morning and bring us back a couple of hours later.

One morning the elephant did not turn up. I was in a quandary as to what to do. The sun was shining in a cloudless sky, and I could hear the eagles calling to each other with their loud and melodious *kooroo kooroo*. I just could not resist the temptation to risk a journey on foot to the site of the lofty tree with its nest.

'The elephant has not come,' I explained to my two men,

'but I am willing to go there on foot. Are you willing to come with me, or do you want to remain here?'

'Where the *sahib* goes, we will also go,' came the not unexpected reply.

We cautiously walked along the narrow track through the elephant grass, and I remember reflecting on how small and vulnerable we were and how very much higher than usual the 15-foot grass was. We reached the silk-cotton tree safely, and then followed an hour's photography. When the angle of the morning sun made further work impossible, it was time for the return journey through the tall grass.

We had not gone more than 100 yards when there was a noise nearby, and with a panicky 'Rhino coming!' both my men, who were aged about 20, disappeared down the track, seemingly breaking all Olympic records.

At their age I could have run even faster. But I knew that a rhino can soon catch up with the fastest of humans. However, I also started to try and escape. The track was wet and slippery and much depressed in places by three-toed rhino and large, circular elephant footprints.

After about 10 yards I did the best possible thing that I

could have done. I slipped and fell down, flat on my face, with the rhino very close at hand. I knew that an Indian rhino, unlike a wild elephant, will not continue its attack on a fallen victim, and I quickly rolled sideways off the track into the grass and remained perfectly still.

The rhino thundered past. After about 20 minutes the grass parted and one of the men, who had come back by a long detour, asked if I was all right. We then went along the track together on to the main road and called to the other man. After a long time he emerged, too frightened to talk. Then, at last, he described how he had eventually thrown himself into a thick clump of grass, and how the rhino had stood over him breathing heavily before going on its way.

While on Kaziranga, it is inevitable that the subject of elephants, both wild and domesticated, should crop up. For wild elephants are nearly always to be found in the interior parts of Kaziranga, sometimes as many as 200 coming in from the Mikir Hills. And riding-elephants are a necessary means of transport in the thick 'elephant grass' which grows to a height of some 15 feet or more, often in ground which is swampy.

A famous riding-elephant we had at Kaziranga for many years was the large tusker named Akbar. Many high-ranking people, including governors of Assam, visited the sanctuary on this noble beast which led the way and which was usually (but not always!) staunch in the presence of an angry cow rhino with her calf. In fact Akbar had several times fought with a rhino which had pressed home its attack, kneeling down with his trunk curled inwards to take the charge, as is the custom with elephants in such a predicament.

Because of its much heavier weight, a trained adult elephant can easily withstand the onslaught of a rhino should the latter actually press home its attack, which very rarely happens. But there is always the danger of the elephant's trunk, an extremely delicate and vulnerable organ, being gashed by the rhino's incisor teeth.

Akbar had killed at least three persons during his service with the Forest Department. In all three cases the person killed had 'asked for it', and I remember the third case very clearly. The grass-cutter of another elephant had for some time been stealing Akbar's grain ration, and one day Akbar could stand it no longer and chased the thief into a house and gored him to death. Immediately after this incident, Akbar's *mahout* went up to the huge beast, mounted him easily and rode him back to the elephant lines, as docile as ever.

In my own early days of photography in Kaziranga, before I had acquired a telephoto lens, I sometimes used to dismount from Akbar and approach a rhino more closely on foot. Akbar used to follow and stand guard just beside me with his huge tusks, so potentially dangerous, only a few inches from my head, protecting me against a possible charge from the rhino. Sometimes he used to walk a few feet behind me as I struggled through the thick grass to film a moving rhino. Then, photography over, the huge beast would kneel down for me to mount him again.

This noble elephant died a natural death of old age in 1956, only six weeks after he had excelled himself by rushing at a wounded tiger in a nearby shoot and knocking it out with a well-placed kick, and two months after he had charged and fought a wild tuskerless bull in the sanctuary. The wounded tiger was killed outright by Akbar, and the wild bull was vanquished after a 5-minute fight.

As a rule, it is only solitary wild bull elephants which are liable to give trouble to a trained bull riding-elephant when in the sanctuary. Wild elephants in herds do not generally cause any anxiety to visitors: in fact when on elephant-back it is sometimes possible to approach or even enter a wild herd. Often an inquisitive or friendly wild elephant will come up to the trained one and caress it with its trunk, apparently unaware of the presence of the dreaded human being on its back!

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best way
see rhino
-from on
top of an
elephant



Centre pages:
Indian
elephants
feeding

Photographs by
the author

