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# ANIMAL KEEPERS' FORUM



**The Journal of the American  
Association of Zoo Keepers, Inc.**

**JUNE 1997**



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# Way Kambas



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Sumatra is the fourth largest island on Earth. It contains an amazing diversity of animal life with over 250 species of herpitiles, 397 species of land birds and 177 species of mammals found on the island. Nearly all of the large mammal species of the Southeast Asia region are native to Sumatra. These include elephants, tapiers, and what are probably the last of Indonesia's tigers. The island holds the largest and possibly the only viable populations of Sumatran rhinoceros on earth. Also found in Sumatra's forest are other large mammals such as sambar deer, barking deer, wild pigs, bearded pig, clouded leopard, sun bear, and Asian wild dog.

Even though the density of the human population, 80 persons per square kilometer, is less than one tenth that of its overpopulated neighbor Java, there are serious environmental problems. The soils of Sumatra are less fertile so it takes six times the amount of acreage to support the average Indonesian family than it does on nearby Java. As a result, many forests on the island, particularly the wildlife-rich lowland areas, are under heavy pressure.

The region of Sumatra suffering the greatest onslaught is Lampung Province on the southern end of the island. Since 1950 it has been an official policy of the Indonesian government to transfer people from crowded Java and Bali and settle them on other islands of the archipelago. As a result nearly four million people have been moved to Sumatra with most of them taking up residence in Lampung. This large number of settlers, combined with a population growth of over 4% annually, has created serious deforestation and erosion problems as well as a devastating effect on the region's wildlife.

Along the Southeast coast of the Province, surrounded by plantations and villages, is the 1,235-square kilometer (477 sq. mi.) Way Kambas reserve. It holds a remnant of some of Lampung's once extensive lowland forest. Way Kambas has an estimated 200-300 wild Sumatran elephants, a large number of tapiers and clouded leopards and 20-30 Sumatran tigers. Sumatran rhinos (an estimated 20+) have also recently been discovered. In addition there are important populations of agile gibbon, siamang, macaques and leaf monkeys. The coastal swamps of Way Kambas contain essential wetland habitat for numerous species and numbers of wading birds. In short, the reserve has the potential to be one of the most important conservation areas in Southeast Asia.

I spent a week in Way Kambas in October 1994 and found it to be one of the most spectacular tropical forest reserves that I have visited. While I did not see the larger and more rare mammals, I was surprised at the numbers and diversity of the birds, primates and smaller mammals that I encountered.



Compared to many Indonesian wildlife areas Way Kambas is relatively easy to visit. The reserve can be reached directly from Jakarta Java by car via a ferry across the Sunda Strait. An alternative would be to fly to Bandar Lampung Sumatra and charter a car or "bemo" (a type of local taxi/van) to drive to Way Kambas. It is also possible to take a series of buses from Jakarta to Bandar Lampung and from there to the park office.

As with all Indonesian parks you must have permits before entering. The permits may be obtained at the Way Kambas Park Headquarters in Tridatu or from the Conservation Department Offices in Bandar Lampung.

There are two areas of the park that have self-service bungalows. These are located at the Elephant Training Center at Kadangsari and at the forestry station at Way Kanan. The area around the training center has some small shops and a restaurant where food and bottled water may be purchased. Visitors to the forestry station, however, must carry their own provisions and drinking water. The bungalows at both locations have their own bed frames, mattress and bedding, but no mosquito netting. One can pack all of this gear or, as I did, arrange for a guide to outfit a trip to the park. The bathrooms are simple affairs: bucket-flushed toilets and traditional Indonesian water barrel and ladle bathing.

A visit to the park should include both the Elephant Training Center and Way Kanan. The Training Center holds over 100 elephants. A few of these animals were born in captivity at the center. However, most of the elephants were taken from the wild after episodes of crop raiding or in some cases, after causing injury or even death to local residents. On my last day at Way Kambas eight elephants were due to be darted and trucked to the center. This was deemed necessary since, two weeks previously, they had killed a woman who had entered the park to collect wild durian fruit.

The personnel at the Center attempt to train the problem animals for eventual use in forestry operations or as riding elephants or performers. The Center conducts a sort of elephant circus once a day in which the animals execute various routines and maneuvers. The most memorable act was a full-grown bull who gently stepped between and over three reclining men who were volunteers from the audience. Just imagine trying to get your institution's insurance company to agree to such a stunt. On weekends an elephant football match (soccer for those unenlightened sports fans among you), very popular with the locals, is played.

The Center is a noteworthy operation run by the Lampung Provincial Government with little assistance from other sources. I found it heartening that the local authorities would go through this lengthy and expensive process rather than just shooting the crop-raiding elephants outright.

While at the Center I got to meet Queenie, a rather remarkable female elephant. Queenie was caring for her own week-old calf and the offspring of another cow who had rejected her infant two weeks before. She also acted as a surrogate



mother to three-year-old Susan who was accidentally left behind in a farmer's field by her crop-raiding mother. Queenie was an attentive and very patient mother who often had three youngsters trying to nurse off her simultaneously.

I also saw some of the more recent and less cooperative newcomers. These elephants could be found in remote corners of the Center with chains on their front and back legs. As I walked by these animals, at a safe distance of course, they first would glare at me then lunge towards me as I passed them. Most of these elephants appeared to be young bulls and I am not sure if any of them could ever be broken and trained.



**The Elephant Training Center at Way Kambas** (*Photo R. Berghaier*)

The Center could probably expand its program of elephant-back safaris into Way Kambas Reserve. However, these types of trips presently have the rider straddling the animal's back which makes for a very uncomfortable ride. Riding elephants in Indian and Nepalese reserves use a basket or carriage to carry passengers which provides a more enjoyable experience.

Although the Elephant Center is worth at least a half-day's visit, the real attraction in Way Kambas is the area of the reserve around the Way Kanan Ranger Post. In my experience it rivals or surpasses better known tropical forest sites I have visited such as Manu and Tambopata in Peru, Cuyabeno in the Ecuadorian Amazon and Ranomafana in Madagascar for the diversity, numbers and ease of visibility of wild animals.

The forest in this sector of the park was selectively logged in the seventies. This has caused an accelerated growth of secondary forest which has evidently



not affected, and has probably accentuated, contact with wildlife at Way Kanan.

The most common methods of viewing wildlife at Way Kanan is either on foot or by boat. Longtailed macaques and silver leaf monkeys are commonly seen while canoeing along the Way Kanan river and once I got a quick glimpse of two pig-tailed macaques. I saw barking deer, small groups of wild pigs and a red giant squirrel which is a reddish version of the giant black Malaysian form. There were water monitors and smaller lizards on the banks and once a thin, red-headed keel rat snake swam alongside us. There was an impressive amount of bird life on the river: white-breasted water hen, black crested serpent and grey-headed fish eagles, crested goshawk, bat hawk, blue-eared, stork-billed and rufous-backed kingfishers, black-bellied malkoha, greater coucal, chestnut-headed and blue-crowned night heron, red-throated barbet, and Oriental darter.

The immediate area around the ranger station is also a wildlife hotspot. Groups of wild pigs and long-tailed macaques would move through camp, usually in the morning. Prevost squirrels were also active in the mornings as well as siamang and agile gibbons which I could hear calling from the surrounding forest. There were barking deer and greater mouse-deer which would graze the camp's clearings at night. Every evening large flying foxes would fly overhead. One evening I found three types of civets: masked, common palm, and banded linsang foraging within 15 feet of one another by an empty bungalow. There was also a family of small-clawed otters which dened near the station and I was able to see them on several occasions. Birds included rufous-tailed and white-rumped shama, plain-throated sunbird, striped wren babbler and black and red broadbill.

I spent one evening camped out on an observation tower along the Way Kanan, downriver from the ranger post. We arrived before dusk and left early the next morning. While our party did not see anything unusual, I was awakened at 2:45 A.M. by the loud alarm bark of a sambar deer. Longer overnight expeditions deep into the interior of the reserve with a ranger escort can be arranged, but all supplies and equipment have to be carried in.

Walks along the road leading into the station became my favorite method to find wildlife. There were small flocks of red jungle fowl, crested firebacked pheasants crossing the road and hill mynas calling overhead. Other birds I saw here included pink-necked green, green imperial and rufous woodpecker, rufous piculet and white-throated kingfisher.

Mammals were relatively easy to spot on both sides of the forest lining the road. I frequently saw siamangs and once found a pair with what I think were two mitered leaf monkeys nearby. Barking deer, wild pig, long-tailed and pig-tailed macaques were more often heard than seen in the forest. I did, however, get a clear look at a lesser mouse-deer. On an evening walk I heard some barking which I assumed at the time was just another barking deer. A few evenings later, through a conversation with my English-speaking guide and the ranger who was assigned to me, I found out that the barking was actually from an Asian wild dog. Squirrels were diverse and I saw black giant, red giant, plantain and three-striped ground squirrel. I am less sure about my identification of



what I believe to have been Lows, slender and black-eared pygmy squirrels. However, all three species can be found in southern Sumatra. On the road at dusk one evening I felt a presence behind me and turned around in time to see a red giant flying squirrel glide over my head and land silently in a nearby tree.

One morning walk turned up one of the oddest looking creatures I have ever seen. It was a thin weasel-like animal which carried its long skinny tail upright. From a distance it looked like a cartoon stick-figure cat. After checking several mammal books on my return, the best possible identification I have come up with for this strange looking creature is the small-toothed palm civit. The highlight of my walks on the road was the leopard cat I watched hunting along the roadside early one morning just after dawn.

The only disappointment of my stay in Way Kambas was not being able to see a wild Sumatran elephant. All I found was old elephant tracks and dried dung during my walks in the forest. My ranger escort, Dermi, and I even found a dead elephant. This adult male must have become stuck in a mud wallow and died. The carcass was buried up to its neck. It was surrounded by a cloud of flies and swarming with maggots. Wild pigs and water monitors had eaten most of the flesh from the skull and it was the sounds they made while running away from us which first drew our attention to the remains.

Way Kambas, like nearly every area that I visited during my trip to Indonesia, was under an extended dry spell. Otherwise I would definitely have seen an elephant. I was told by two researchers that during the wet season elephants could be found nightly along the road from the park headquarters to the Elephant Center. The animals would cross this road every evening to raid the agricultural fields which border this area of the reserve. There are rickety wooden watchtowers scattered in the fields by this section of the reserve. They are used by the local farmers who man these structures to try to keep elephants out of the fields. These men keep a lonely and dangerous vigil using flashlights, firecrackers and the noise from banging gongs to attempt to discourage the crop-raiders.

The two researchers I met were an Irishwoman, Joanne Reilly and an Englishman, Guy Spedding, who were based at Way Kanan. They were collaborating on an elephant survey of the Reserve and had just been finishing their second year in the park. In the course of the project they spent numerous nights deep in the remote and wetter areas of Way Kambas. They would often see elephant, sambar deer, an occasional sun bear, and tiger and tapir tracks. Joanne and Guy were also responsible for gathering evidence that confirmed the presence of Sumatran rhinoceros in Way Kambas. They had in the course of their elephant work found three-toed ungulate tracks that were too large to be that of a tapir. They took casts of the tracks which were eventually verified to be those of the rhinoceros. It was a population of the animal that had been previously unknown to western researchers. Rangers had reported seeing rhinoceros in the reserve in the past but no one had believed them.

I spent two nights riding with Joanne and Guy trying to find wild elephants. I



did miss, by an hour, one bull which had been attempting to raid a nearby farm. The farmer and his son had managed to drive the elephant out of their field before our arrival using flashlights and banging pots and pans. Though we did not find any elephants, we did see leopard cats, palm civets, wild pigs, savanah nightjars, Malaysian field rats and a penciled-tailed tree-mouse along the roadway.

The most unusual night sighting happened near Way Kanan. On our return to the forestry station Joanne and I got a glimpse of a red animal bounding off the road and into the forest. Guy, who was concentrating on his driving, did not see it clearly. Joanne and I are not positive about what we saw, but the size, color and method of movement of the creature leads me to believe that it was either an Asian wild dog or a golden cat. Since I had heard wild dog in the vicinity of the station I think that was most likely the animal we saw running across the road that night.

There are wildlife areas in Indonesia better known than Way Kambas. Places like the Komodo Islands, Tanjung Puting and Ujung Kulon easily come to mind. In my opinion Way Kambas has the potential to join these areas and become a premier ecotourism destination. Like all of Indonesia's reserves Way Kambas needs international support to provide the training, equipment and infrastructure needed to insure the reserve's survival on an increasingly crowded island.

*(Editor's Note: The Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary at Way Kambas is a captive breeding/ecotourism project supported by \$2 million Global Environmental Fund grant and a \$50,000 International Rhino Foundation grant. At the writing, a European Union grant was pending. AAZK supports the Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park in Sumatra through its annual Bowling for Rhinos fundraiser.)*

