



NIGHT LIFE IN UPPER BENGAL

Photos by T. V. Dent

On the left is an Indian fox, a dainty little invader from the surrounding village lands, and on the right the ubiquitous barking deer, found throughout the tract

# PROTECTING THE GREAT INDIAN RHINOCEROS

## A Last Sanctuary in Bengal

By E. O. SHEBBEARE  
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THE Great Indian rhinoceros, once common along the foot of the Himalayas from the Punjab eastwards, is now only found in a few places in Nepal, Northern Bengal and Assam. Though this rhinoceros is becoming alarmingly rare everywhere, Nepal and Assam are better off than Bengal, where its habitat is restricted to a few places in the Duars and Cooch Behar State. Here the last main stronghold of the species is a tract of high grass savannah along the Torsa river, stretching from the foothills of Bhutan, through the Duars, into Cooch Behar. It is a narrow strip, not more than 40 miles from north to south and, at its widest, four miles from east to west—perhaps 50 or 60 square miles. Outside this tract the few scattered colonies can perhaps muster a dozen individuals in all, but unfortunately these outliers have no spare coverts into which they can expand.

Although the rhinoceros often wanders many miles into tree forest, his real home is dense grass jungle up to 20ft. high, which, with a few scattered trees, covers square mile upon square mile of the abandoned beds of Himalayan rivers. Here he grazes most of the night and sleeps most of the day, wallowing in the hot weather in marshy pools with only his head above the mud. He is methodically indolent, and sets a wonderfully straight course from mud-hole to grazing ground, and from grazing ground to his drinking pools in the clear gravelly streams. The high roads of his tribe do not vary from generation to generation; shady tunnels through the dense towering grass and deep-worn paths where this thins out under the shade of trees—in short, broodingnagian rabbit-runs. Contrary to what one hears of African rhino, ours is seldom aggressive, nor does he cause havoc to agricultural crops like the elephant.

Besides the Great Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), the Lesser Indian rhinoceros (*R. sondaicus*) inhabited these jungles until at least as recently as 30 years ago, when one was shot by a forest officer. Until he received Messrs. Rowland Ward's report on his trophies this officer believed that the animal he had killed was the ordinary *R. unicornis*. He little thought that he had probably shot one of the last, if not the last, of its race in this locality. At that time rhino had not been closed to shooting, and it was usual for those of us who were working in these forests to be allowed to shoot one during our service. Now I believe many of us would be glad enough to put our specimen back alive, if that were possible.

The other animals that share these coverts with the rhino are mainly grass-jungle game such as the buffalo, swamp-deer, and, where the grass is shorter, the hog-deer together with the ubiquitous tiger, pig, sloth-bear, sambhur and barking deer. The Hima-

layan bear comes as far south in the hot weather, and the bison, though normally a tree forest animal, enters the tract in search of the new grass which springs up after fires. Leopards frequent the outskirts, but even the heaviest "forest" leopard leaves the heart of this wild tract to his more formidable relation. Wild elephant, though only too plentiful in the surrounding forest, give the rhino and his haunts a wide berth.

A good idea of the wild life of these jungles, as well as of the jungles themselves, can be gained from a book recently brought out by the Swedish wild-life photographer, Mr. Bengt Berg, *Meine Jagd nach dem Einhorn* (Messrs. Ritten & Looming; Frankfurt-on-Main). His book is for the rhino country of Northern Bengal what Mr. Champion's books are for the forests of the United Provinces. Of his 66 full-page reproductions no less than nineteen are close-up photographs from life of wild rhinos showing a number of individuals of both sexes and all ages in a great variety of positions. This in itself is an unique achievement, but he also reproduces a beautiful selection of close-up life studies of buffalo, bison, tiger, leopard, elephant (wild as well as tame), sloth bear, monitor-lizard and civet cat. Almost all these pictures were obtained during a six-weeks' halt at a single camp in the heart of the country that I am describing.

If my description of the haunt of the rhino has called up visions of an awe-inspiring or even repulsive wilderness of high grass and swamps peopled with truculent wild beasts, I have failed altogether to do justice to the charm and beauty of the place. To a man on foot, following a rhino path through the denser patches of grass-jungle, it is true that the view is limited to the walls of the tunnel itself, but there are wide stretches of grass that is waist-high or even less, and cleared fire-lines traverse the tract.

For the last 25 years in Bengal and Assam rhino have been closed to sportsmen, but this has not saved them from poachers, who shoot them to obtain their horns. From time immemorial these have been highly prized for superstitious reasons. A cup made of the horn of a rhinoceros is still believed to render poison innocuous, a point of some importance to tyrannical rulers, and, when powdered, it is held in the East, especially in China, to be the most potent aphrodisiac. It is believed that most of the horns that are smuggled out of these jungles eventually find their way to China, but however this may be their present value in the Calcutta market is about half their weight in gold. A single horn retrieved from the poachers recently fetched £150, and still higher prices have been known. That an animal by nature condemned to carry such a price on his nose should tempt poachers is not to be

wondered at, but the remoteness of their strongholds and their armour, too thick to be penetrated by "gas-pipe" guns, was their protection, and up to about six years ago there were probably some 200 animals living in the small tract I have described.

Then poaching began. The first poachers came from Assam, where they had plied the same trade, and brought with them muzzle-loading guns heavy enough to kill a rhino. They were joined by local men of the same tribe (Mechs) and formed themselves into gangs. Their plan was to build a light bamboo staging about 8ft. above the ground at strategic points; usually where two well-worn rhino-tracks met, and lie up when the moon was nearly full. Sooner or later a victim was bound to pass by and received a heavy bullet at a range of a few feet. It would usually charge off and the poachers, waiting for daylight, had an easy blood-trail to follow. They seldom took more than the horn; to try to dispose of the meat, which, by the way, is excellent eating, would have aroused suspicion, and the organisers, wealthy men who kept well in the background, probably forbade their gangs to sell it. For nearly three years this went on without any suspicion being aroused—not a record of which the Forest Department can feel proud, perhaps, but, on the other hand, detection was none too easy.

To begin with rhino country is of no great commercial value as compared with timber forest, and not more than two or three ill-paid forest guards could be spared to patrol a tract which produced so little revenue. Some of these guards must, almost certainly, have at least had their suspicions aroused, even if they were not actually "in the know," but they were either bribed or terrorised into keeping the matter to themselves. Rhino-poaching was a paying business and could afford to pay hush-money if necessary, or, if that failed, a forest guard could disappear as easily as a rhino in that matted tangle of high grass. It may be thought that a form of poaching which involves the letting off of at least one heavy charge from a gun for each animal killed and of leaving the huge carcass at the scene of the crime, ought not to be difficult to detect. It must, however, be remembered that the tract in which the rhino live is a narrow strip surrounded on all sides by cultivated land in which the villagers possess innumerable guns for the protection of their crops from deer and pig, and that a mortally wounded rhino is not normally going out into the open to die. A tunnel in 15ft. grass is almost as effective as a grave, for vultures work by sight alone. I have said that a rhino will not normally go out into the open to die; as a matter of fact it was an exception to this rule that first awakened us to the state of affairs.

Once the poaching had been detected the Forest Department took immediate steps, but this is not to say that the poaching stopped. It continued for at least another six months, for the poachers and their financial supporters were not going to drop a good thing so easily, and shots were exchanged on both sides and arrests made and prosecutions instituted before the evil ceased. I wish I could say ceased finally, but I am not such an optimist. The moment the pressure is taken off it is bound to crop up again, the organisation and the markets are still there, and the poachers are only biding their time.

Nor was it left to the Forest Department alone to put a stop to this lucrative form of poaching.



T. V. Dent

A HOG DEER STAG IN VELVET

The Government of Bengal once it was acquainted with the facts, rose to the occasion. To begin with, existing legislation was inadequate, and the Honourable Member in Charge of Forests (Sir A. K. Gaznavi) set himself to pilot a Bill through Council making the killing of rhino, except in the defence of life, an offence and declaring all parts of a rhino to be the property of Government.

But money was required to increase the inadequate staff. With the trade slump at its very worst, to ask for additional funds without holding out any hope of resulting revenue was useless. Luckily, an ardent protector of rare fauna, Mr. Bengt Berg, already referred to, was on the spot. His advice was briefly to "make the commoner game pay for the protection of the rarer"; in other words, to lease the shooting of the open species. He became our first tenant. He was chiefly interested in photographing and in studying the habits of wild animals, but he shot two tigers.

The "Rhino-Reserve" was already included in the area



C. G. Baron

"A PRICE ON HIS NOSE"—RHINOCEROS UNICORNIS

leased to the Torsa-Sanko Shooting and Fishing Association, and our thanks are due to this sporting body for allowing the shooting of this part of the jungle to be excluded in the interests of preservation.

Our attempts have so far been successful. Since Christmas, 1931, so far as we know, only one rhino has been killed, and the perpetrators are now in gaol. Our efforts must not be allowed to relax. We want a tenant for the season 1935-36, a party, say, of five guns who would take it for a month or six weeks. February would probably be the best, but any time from November, 1935, until March, 1936, would do quite well. Tiger would be limited to five, other open game *ad lib*. Any sportsmen who take it will, I feel sure, enjoy the opportunities afforded of securing trophies and photographs in this wonderful tract and will be assisting in the protection of some of the rarest species in the world.

[The *Field* will be pleased to forward any inquiries.—Ed.]



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A SMALL INDIAN CIVET CAT ON A TIGER KILL