

# BIG GAME'S CHANCES IN ASSAM

## Preservation and Provincial Autonomy

By C. W. MILROY

**T**HE BIG GAME animals of most interest in Assam are the Great Indian Rhinoceros (*R. unicornis*), the Indian two-horned rhinoceros (*R. javanicus*), the buffalo and the bison. The elephant may be excluded from consideration as an article of commerce; its interests are already being looked after.

It ought to be possible to afford sufficient protection to these species to prevent their absolute extermination for many years to come, but it is doubtful if anything on a more ambitious scale could be successfully carried through in view of present and probable future conditions.

The best shooting grounds in the province have always been situated in the waste lands of the plains, but these are now being rapidly filled up by immigrant settlers, and it is only a question of time before there will remain very little land still unoccupied. It is true that the game is being destroyed in some localities far faster than is necessary in the immediate interests of cultivation, but however lamentable this may be there is one insuperable obstacle to stricter control being exercised over the waste lands, and that is lack of funds. It would obviously be mere waste of time to argue whether Government should or should not do more to uphold its game laws when there is no possibility of money being found for any expenditure on protective measures that might be proposed.

### DECREASE OF WASTE LANDS

Though the waste lands are becoming increasingly impossible for the preservation of game, there are, however, a considerable number of forest reserves scattered up and down the province, many of which are very suitable for the purpose. The reserves are maintained for the production of timber except in the case of two game sanctuaries, but though high forest itself does not usually present conditions most favourable for the more important wild animals there are always tracts of grassland and reeds which form ideal grazing grounds and breeding haunts.

The two hostile factors in the case of reserves are the increasing demand for cultivable land and the indifference of some forest officers. The former must be met either by deforesting the comparatively small isolated patches of lowland, a thoroughly unsatisfactory method, or by the extension as necessity arises of the forest village system. The existing forest villages provide the only available source of labour supply in the case of many reserves, and no game preserver would object to their number being increased provided care was taken to exclude poaching individuals and castes, and to maintain control over the guns issued for the protection of crops.

### MAN'S NEEDS AND ANIMALS

By combining a little common sense with some knowledge of the requirements of both cultivators and animals, it should be possible without great difficulty to devise measures which would at any rates save the bigger animals from the complete annihilation with which otherwise they are likely to be threatened in the course of time. Not all reserves by any means are suitable for the maintenance of a head of game, but those that are especially so and are situated where reasonable game protection would not be objectionable should be selected; grazing grounds for the wild animals should be set aside as permanently closed to cultivation and to grazing by cattle; and freedom from molestation, except in the case of crop destroyers and animals which have become dangerous, should be insured as far as possible by regulating the issue of guns and ammunition and the seasons at which they might be issued.

All this is not so impossible as it may sound, for a start has already been made by demarcating grazing grounds for departmental baggage and timber elephants, and an extension of these in suitable places would provide for the game too; while steps regarding the calling-in of villagers' firearms at certain seasons have been enforced in several reserve forests during the last few years.

Continuity of policy can only be assured if it is known that interest from above is being displayed, and to this end the local government might very well insist upon game protection being dealt with annually in the Forest Administration Report. Great personal interest cannot be expected from individual forest officers who are not built that way, but the necessity of reporting annually on the subject would have some stimulating effect which would be all to the good.

Mention has been made of two sanctuaries; these are the Kazirunga, south of the Brahmapootra in Central Assam, and the Monas, touching Bhutan towards the north-west. They are established primarily for the preservation of the Great Indian Rhino, and had achieved most satisfactory results up to a few years ago, when poaching was taken up on a commercial scale, necessitating the despatch of troops by the local government, which has usually been sympathetic and helpful regarding reasonable game preservation.

The rhino has always been persecuted for its flesh, which even Brahmins may eat, and for its horn, which has the reputation throughout the East of restoring vitality to the aged; and now that rhino of all species have become so scarce the value of the survivors has appreciated very greatly. There is too much money behind the scenes for rhino poaching ever to be stamped out; but it is well worth while persisting with the maintenance of the sanctuaries, as the protection at present afforded should suffice to prevent absolute extermination, and there may come a time when autonomous Assam will be proud to fall into line with those Dominions and countries which have adopted such wholehearted measures to preserve and display their treasured fauna.

Game animals cannot be expected to survive in

powers and the means of upholding them; but it would probably be far preferable to preserve game in suitable localities in the political areas where controlled shikar could be permitted than to establish any fresh sanctuaries, for under the forest regulation anyone taking out a shooting permit can be made responsible for reporting about poaching and for rendering assistance in the detection and capture of poachers.

Taking it all round, game has a greater chance of surviving in the political tracts, but here again interest from above would be necessary to keep political officers up to the mark. It must be emphasised in conclusion that wherever game comes into collision with the cultivator the game will go, whatever laws and prohibitions there may be. There are still more or less remote spots where game can exist without harming anybody, but if it is decided to protect the game in such places, steps must also be taken to keep the cultivator at a proper distance permanently, or the eventual extinction of the animals is only being delayed, not prevented, for sooner or later the fatal collision will occur.

(A letter from Mr. James Best on Buffalo in the C.P. appears in our correspondence columns.)

## AUSTRALIA'S ONLY BIG GAME

### Migratory Buffalo

**I**N THE FAR NORTH of Australia the one species of big game on the Continent, the buffalo, provides its hunters with an exhilarating sport and a profitable business.

The buffaloes chiefly inhabit a stretch of the northern mainland of Australia from Arnhem Land to the Gulf of Carpentaria, along the coast and only as far inland as the swamps and waterholes are found, which are a necessity of existence for



AN AUSTRALIAN BUFFALO ALARMED

Very little is known of this species, of which only two are recorded by Rowland Ward. It is to be hoped hunting will not exterminate them like the American bison.

the hills outside reserve forests any more than in the plains, because, though most of the land under the system of shifting cultivation lapses into jungle between the periods of being cropped, the hillman is omnivorous in his tastes, and a most persistent and skilful trapper of every kind of animal from a bison to a mouse. Salt-licks are found in most hills, and it is the hillmen's custom to sit up at nights in these and to fire—hit or miss, wound or kill—at everything that approaches within range. Interference at this date would probably be regarded as politically inexpedient.

### NEED FOR PROTECTION

In the writer's opinion, then, the big game is bound to disappear from all lands in Assam where it is not specially protected, in the same way as occurred centuries ago in many parts of Europe, and for the same irresistible reason, namely, increase of population. A limited number of the larger animals are likely to persist in the reserve forests most suited for them, if reasonable precautions are now taken, but lack of funds and lack of interest will probably prevent anything more than this being achieved unless in the course of time the province awakes to the value of its fauna, and, more prosperous days having returned, can afford to insist upon its sanctuaries being more adequately guarded.

It seems almost certain, however, that some of the tracts inhabited by the more savage tribes will remain under Imperial control.

Game preservation would always have a better chance of being successful in a political area than outside, because the officer in charge has summary

buffalo. On Melville Island, too, just off the coast, buffalo are in great numbers.

They are not native to Australia. Dutch settlers from Timor imported a few of them in 1826 for domestic purposes. But they were allowed to run wild in the luxuriant grass and bushland, and multiplied exceedingly, so that to-day the number on the mainland is estimated at 30,000. They have so developed out of their original smallish, stocky stature, that the present-day species is an animal of imposing physique and great strength, weighing up to three tons, with a great sweep of horns.

### WILL HUNTING EXTERMINATE THEM?

Two of the best-known regular buffalo hunters are Messrs. Cecil Freer and H. Hardy. Mr. Freer's cattle station is 100 miles from Darwin and he takes his skins to that town by boat along the coast to sell them at £2 apiece.

Soon after daybreak is the best time, and the usual tactics are for the hunters to manoeuvre for a favourable place in the wind, and then to startle the herd by a surprise shock of rifle fire. The animals, bellowing loudly, stampede for the timber and the hunters follow, firing as they ride. The tussle is short and sharp, but escapes are not unusual for the horsemen pursuing wounded beasts.

The hunting season begins in May, when the dry earth provides the needed galloping foothold for the ponies, and it ends in October, when the monsoons begin. Some of the hunters supply as many as 1,500 hides to the market annually. But the herds show no appreciable diminution, and big game hunting in Northern Australia is likely to continue for a long time.