



INDIAN BISON in the Bandipur sanctuary, Mysore. Good herds are encountered in the north-east, the east and in the south of India.

## SHIKAR IN INDIA TODAY

By MURAD K. FYZEE

### The present price of past mistakes, and the work of a Government of India Board for preservation and development in the future

IN assessing the balance sheet of India's wild life today, examination of the profit and loss account shows a heavy debit side. Only the most energetic efforts by the Government of India, together with the vigorous arousing of public consciousness, will ever restore the yields of rich dividends from this incalculably valuable natural national asset.

The spirit of the present age, of scientific research and humanity, and the realisation of what man owed to, and the extent to which he could benefit from, nature, together with the excellent examples set by countries of the West, brought about, in 1952, the establishment by the Government of India of the Indian Board of Wild Life under the chairmanship of the Maharaja of Mysore. Supported by legislation which is exemplary, the board is actively engaged in every aspect of nature preservation and the development of India's magnificent fauna and flora.

Wild life officers are being recruited, *shikar* and tourist agencies are being screened and carefully appointed to handle controlled hunting, poaching and illicit shooting are severely dealt with, nature study courses are encouraged in schools and colleges, and public interest is being stimulated by articles, lectures and radio talks. Perhaps the most significant steps are the creation and development of national parks and sanctuaries, and the encouragement of replacing rifle and shotgun by camera and notebook.

In addition, the Bombay Natural History Society has for 60 years held a position of international repute and authority for its research, surveys and good works concerning the fauna and flora of India.

What, then, is the *hisab* (accounts summary) of wild life which can be presented to the shareholders—the friends and people of India? There are roughly some 1,800 species of birds, 350 species being winter visitors from northern lands. In forest glades can be seen the gorgeous hues of wild peacock, while parakeets flash green across indigo skies. Numerous varieties of excellent game-birds flourish, including spotbill, teal, sand-grouse, quail, partridge, pheasant and wild jungle *marqi* (fowl). The white-winged wood duck is now fully protected. In the Himalaya can be seen the lammergeier, one of the most spectacular of all birds. But the great Indian bustard and great Indian hornbill, two of the world's largest birds, are becoming dangerously scarce, while pink-headed duck has become extinct.

In the *mahseer*, India boasts one of the most sporting of all game fishes. Sparkling mountain streams of Kashmir and the Nilgiris teem with wholesome trout. In the slower, majestic rivers and lakes, ancient turtles and 16-foot crocodiles bask on muddy banks.

India's more than 500 species of mammals contain some of nature's most beautiful and unique specimens: silky-haired langurs, flying squirrels and lemur, martens, Himalayan foxes, the scaly ant-

eater, and the Indian painted bat, with its vivid vermilion-and-black wings.

More than any other of India's creatures, deer have suffered at the hands of man. This, in turn, has upset the inexorable balance of nature, for the ecological equilibrium has been disturbed. The graceful blackbuck and four-horned antelope (*chousingha*), the only representatives of these genera, together with the Indian gazelle (*chinkara*), are gradually becoming rarer, while the brow-antlered deer or *thamin*, found only in Manipur on India's easternmost frontiers, has become so rare as to have become practically extinct.

With the reduction and progressive disappearance of these antelopes, their main and natural predator, the Indian cheetah, has vanished. It was a creature of the wide open spaces, not of the forests. As more areas were opened up for grazing, cultivation and settlement, it seems to have lost the battle for survival against man. Perhaps the fastest of all quadrupeds, the cheetah for centuries was trained for hunting by the kings, the princes and chiefs of India's feudal history. No authentic report of the cheetah in its wild state has been received for many years.

Magnificent specimens of sambhar, largest of the Indian deer, spotted deer (*chital*), and swamp deer (*barasingha*), can be seen, especially in the Kanha sanctuary of Madhya Pradesh (formerly the Central Provinces) and in the Terai of Uttar Pradesh (formerly the United Provinces). Barking deer (*karkar*), like sambhar, prefer thick jungles; hog deer and blue bull (*nilghai*) like open grassland.

Amid the lonely grandeur of the world's highest mountains can be seen the giant wild sheep of the Himalaya, *urial*, *nayan*, *bharal*, and the famed markhor and ibex. Here, too, is the home of the fabulous ounce, or snow leopard, a trophy coveted for its exquisite colouring and soft luxuriant beauty. The creature is so rarely seen that little is known about it. Its home lies in that region of stupendous rock, ravine and crag, at an altitude of 13,000 feet.

The splendid wild buffalo and *gaur*, or Indian "bison," the largest of the world's existing bovines, are to be seen in good herds in the north-east, east and south. Wild elephants, smaller in bulk but reputedly larger-hearted than their African cousins, roam the jungles and sanctuaries of Kaziranga in Assam, Bandipur in Mysore, Madumalai in Mysore and Periyar in Travancore-Cochin, where, at appropriate seasons, *kedah* operations are organised for the capture and domestication of wild elephants by specially trained tame specimens. Only if an elephant is declared a rogue may it be shot—under special licence. Otherwise, the Indian elephant, essentially a benign and noble beast and part of the pageantry and splendour of India's history and mythology, is strictly protected.

Within easy flying distance of Calcutta lies the superb Kaziranga sanctuary, near the mighty Brahmaputra, last stronghold of the great Indian one-horned rhinoceros, one of the largest of rhinos inhabiting the earth. Here some 250 of these monster beasts survive peacefully under careful protection. In the sixteenth century the rhino used to range as far west as Peshawar and India's North-West Frontier, but today it is to be found only in the Nepal Terai, north Bengal and Assam. There is estimated a total of a mere 450 of these creatures left.

The lion, now the state insignia of India, has disappeared from all Asia, save for just under 300 existing in the Gir Forest of Saurashtra, under strict protection. Here the lion seems to be thriving, and the Indian Board of Wild Life is considering the interesting idea of rehabilitating this fine beast in some of its former habitat in other parts of India.

Finally, there is what both naturalists and hunters, whether from the bear-caves of Alaska or the lion-plains of Africa, describe as the supreme beast: the tiger. Immortalised down the ages in prose and poetry, the *bagh* or *sher* of India's secret jungle places symbolises primeval savagery, superlative cunning and the embodiment of pure animal beauty and power. The tiger, a newcomer compared with the Asiatic lion—having migrated through the northern passes some 4,000 to 5,000 years ago—has been able, because of its inherent cunning and stealthy nature (like the panther or leopard, for they are the same animal), to establish itself strongly practically all over India.

Considerable controversy exists as to whether the tiger is becoming scarcer. Supporters of the view that it is not submit the evidence of figures drawn from a census of jungle animal populations. This, however, is never sufficiently conclusive. With their natural food, such as deer, having become scarce—indicative that the ecological equilibrium and the balance of nature has become upset—frequent reports of cattle-lifting and the dreaded activities of man-eaters continue to appear. The significant fact remains that the steady depletion of game which supports the tiger, and panther, is a greater threat to the existence of this truly magnificent beast than the depredations of the *shikari*.



SWAMP-DEER STAGS in the Kanha National Park, Madhya Pradesh. Deer have suffered more than any other animals at the hand of man.



Photographs by E. P. Gee  
IN THE KAZIRANGA sanctuary, Assam. A great Indian one-horned rhinoceros, with cattle egrets.