

WILDLIFE IN INDIA

By E. P. GEE

After the shikaris left, reserves for animals and birds were set up : Now much that was threatened is safe



A SPOONBILL at its nest in a sanctuary near Bharatpur in the former Rajput State. It is found throughout India except in the drier and more hilly regions.

SOME apprehension must have been felt, especially by those who knew the India of old, that in a newly fledged democracy of more than 400 million people there would be little chance of wildlife escaping mass destruction. It is true that for the first five years after 1947 little could be done for preservation in India, but the constitution of the Indian Board for Wildlife at the Centre in 1952, followed by the setting up of similar boards in most of the states of the Indian Union, have subsequently met with some success.

With the exit from India at the time of independence of such personalities as Jim Corbett and F. W. Champion, and with the subsequent departure of the indefatigable Lieut.-Colonel R. W. Burton, there was a dearth of knowledgeable men to carry on the good work. In fact, when Burton declined a seat on the Indian Board for Wildlife because of his age, the Government of India had to look for some sort of substitute, and somehow the writer of this article was appointed in his stead.

The general position today is that wildlife throughout India has decreased in numbers, in some cases alarmingly, outside the sanctuaries and national parks. But against this we must realise that this is

E. P. Gee lives in India, where he is adviser to local state governments on the preservation of wildlife. Formerly he was a tea planter.

an inevitable consequence of a large human population extending its cultivations and grazing grounds, as has happened in Europe and many other parts of the world.

On the credit side, additional sanctuaries have been made in which it is fully protected and in which the populations of mammals and birds have in many cases increased. Illustrations of these encouraging increases will be given later, and in the meantime I will mention the official policy on wildlife outside sanctuaries.

An effort is being made to control the shooting in all reserved forests. *Shikar* is still possible, and there are many *shikar* agencies operating with government approval in the various states. Bag limits will have to be enforced and the shooting rules strictly followed, otherwise there will be little if anything left to shoot in future years. For example, the population of the tiger, that finest of all sporting trophies, has in my personal opinion probably decreased from about 40,000 fifty years ago to 4,000 today. Even though in a few parts of India there are still sufficient tigers for sportsmen (including tourists from abroad) to shoot, there is no doubt that in the near future the normal forest-dwelling tiger will have to be closed to shooting, except with a camera.

* * *

THIS is where the new trend reveals itself; in future most of the *shikar* in India will have to be 'camera *shikar*,' and who would deny that shooting with a camera is more difficult and more adventurous than killing with a rifle? In future years the occasional elephant, gaur (Indian 'bison'), sambar, chital, tiger, leopard and so on will be surplus and open for shooting, but the emphasis is sure to be on 'camera *shikar*,' especially now that there are many sanctuaries with many animals and birds.

Another future trend in India will be that more encouragement and facilities will be given to tourists from abroad and sportsmen in general for fishing. Those with nostalgic memories of trout fishing in Kashmir and *mahseer* fishing in the Himalayan foothills and in south India will be glad to know that the gentle art is as good as ever, if not better than in the old days.

During the last 35 years I have had the good fortune to visit all India's main wildlife sanctuaries, many of them several times over. I have seen most of these places quite recently, and can vouch that in nearly all cases the animal populations are safe, even increasing in some cases.



A TRIO of Great Indian rhinoceros in a mud wallow. Now limited to North Bengal and Assam, they are better tempered than the African variety.



FAMILIAR SILHOUETTES against the Indian sky at dusk and dawn, white ibis at a nesting colony in trees overlooking a *jheel*. Fully protected bird sanctuaries have been established in many Indian districts.



THE WILD ASS which, said Omar Khayyam, stamped o'er the head of Bahram, the great hunter. Nine hundred of them have been counted in the Little Rann of Kutch, Gujarat state.



PAINTED STORKS are common birds in well-watered areas. They live in colonies on trees, 70 to 100 nests being found together.

In Kaziranga, for instance, in spite of recurring floods and persistent poachers, the Indian rhino has steadily increased from about 12 in 1906 to about 275 at the present time. Whereas swamp deer nearly disappeared in this sanctuary 12 years ago, there are now quite large herds of them to be seen everywhere. Hog deer, scarce a few years ago, are now very numerous. Wild buffalo, elephant, sambar, pig and so on are also plentiful here, and all the animals can be approached closely on elephant-back. The Manas Sanctuary in Assam is also flourishing, with *mahseer* fishing and photography of scenery and wild buffalo becoming more and more popular.

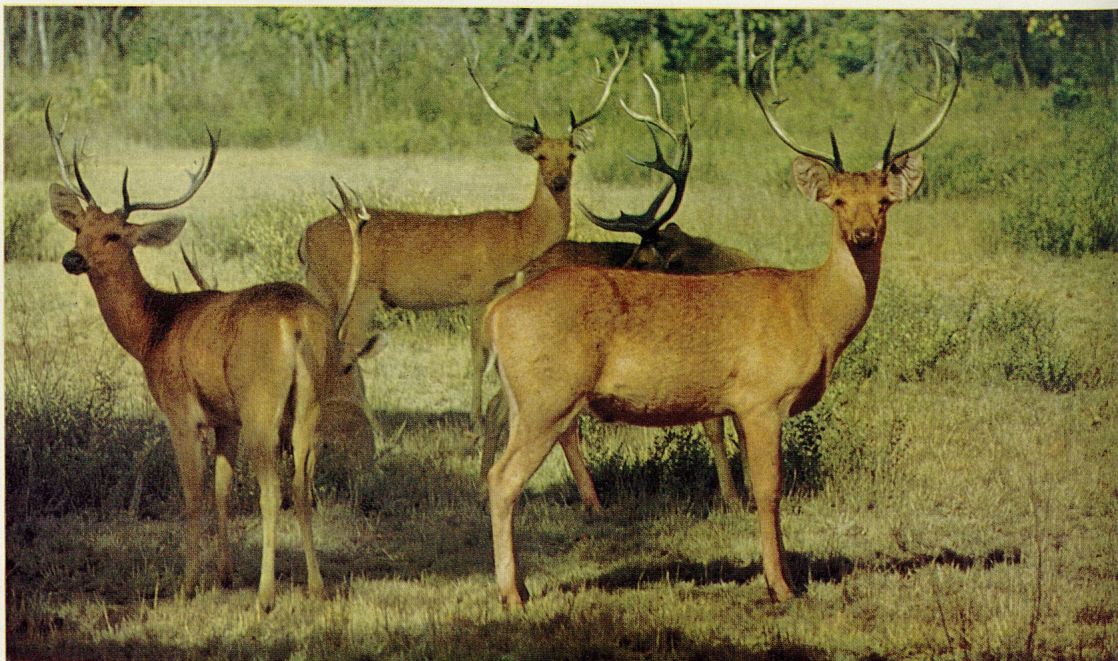
Indian rhino are also well protected in Jaldapara Sanctuary of Bengal. In Bihar, the new Hazaribagh National Park is improving. The showplace of Uttar Pradesh (still the 'U.P.' of the old days) is, of course, the Corbett (formerly Hailey) National Park, main stronghold of the tiger.

Since independence the lion, emblem of India and formerly the property of a ruling prince, has become better known. The 100 or so lions of Lord Curzon's days are now believed to have increased to 'a little over 280' according to the latest census in the Gir Forest. This place is only one and a half hours' flying time from Bombay to Keshod airfield, plus another hour's motor journey to the rest-house at Sasan. I was last there in February 1962, and saw any number of lions, which compare favourably with those I have seen in East Africa. I have several times photographed them on foot quite close, and more visitors than ever are going there to see a 'lion show' arranged by the authorities.

* * *

NOT far from the Gir Forest, and also in the new Gujarat State, is the Little Rann of Kutch, where about 900 wild asses live. I spent a most enjoyable week studying and photographing these fine zebra-like, undonkey-like creatures, sometimes following them in a jeep at 34 m.p.h. over the dry Rann. Perhaps the saddest animal story of India is that of the Kashmir stag. There were probably 2,000 of this noble sub-species of red deer in pre-independence days, but these *barasingh* have now dwindled to about 200. Though they live mainly in Dachigam Sanctuary, a place of unsurpassed beauty, their status is unfortunately somewhat precarious.

Also known as *barasingh*, or 12-pointer, are the swamp deer of the old Banjar Valley Reserve of Madhya Pradesh (formerly the Central Provinces). This place is now Kanha National Park, with new rest-houses, roads and other facilities for visitors. Though the numbers of animals have decreased since the days of Dunbar



ON THE ALERT: Barasingh or swamp deer, which are now plentiful in the Kanha National Park in the former Central Provinces, and other Indian reserves. The coat is characterised by a row of white spots on either side of the spine.

Brander, who compared the *maidan* here with the average park of Africa for numbers and variety of 'game,' the swamp deer, black-buck and chital are still fairly plentiful, and probably much tamer now than before, seeing that shooting of them has been stopped.

Only last year I photographed swamp deer as close as 12ft. from a Jeep and 20ft. on foot. Gaur (Indian 'bison') have increased at Kanha; and are sufficient to allow some of their numbers to fall victims to tigers. I will never forget my recent experience of sitting down behind a tiny bush on the ground (not up in a *machan*) and watching a couple of tigers on a gaur which they had just killed.

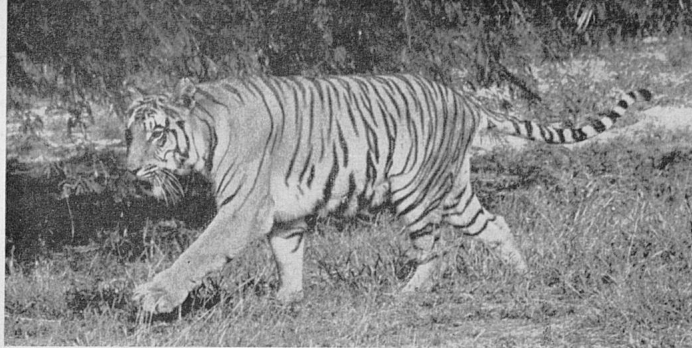
* * *

SHIVPURI is another national park, in old Gwalior State, now part of Madhya Pradesh. Here can be seen sambar, nilgai, chinkara and large numbers of peafowl. The wildlife of this place, decimated immediately after independence, is now satisfactorily recovering.

Farther south, in Mysore, is Bandipur Sanctuary, perhaps the most famous spot in India for gaur. Adjoining it on the Madras side is Mudumalai Sanctuary, and the two places together form one of the best parts of the sub-continent for wildlife. At both these sanctuaries new rest-houses, with catering and other facilities laid on, have been in operation for some years.

One of the real show places of India is undoubtedly Periyar Sanctuary in Kerala. Two good hotels are fully equipped to accommodate visitors, and diesel-engined boats ply on the 3,000ft. high lake. Whenever wild elephants, gaur or sambar are sighted, the boat steers towards the shore first at half-speed, then silently with the engine shut off. In this way I have photographed these three species with very satisfying results.

Birds and their sanctuaries cannot be omitted from any account of the new India. There are good, fully protected breeding colonies of water birds at many places, most important of which are in the Sunderbans, south of Calcutta, at Bharatpur, south of Delhi, and at Vedanthangal, not far from Madras. Breeding seasons vary according to which part of the country the sanctuary is situated in; Bharat-



THE TIGER is becoming increasingly rare, numbers having fallen from about 40,000 50 years ago to about 4,000 today.

pur is best in August, September and October, while Vedanthangal is best in December, January and February.

Wherever I have toured in India I have received kindness and hospitality, and tourists can be assured of a good welcome everywhere, with tourist information offices in all the major cities and towns to assist them. Reservations for accommodation and permits to visit any sanctuary can be obtained from the local Divisional Forest Officer or from the Chief Conservator of Forests of the state concerned.

From time to time alarming rumours of large-scale destruction of wildlife, of species on the verge of extinction and so on have appeared in the Press. For example, the Indian lions in their new home at Chandraprabha, in the United Provinces, have several times been 'captured and placed in the Lucknow Zoo,' but these animals (which have increased from three to seven and are expected to number 11 next year) still roam in their sanctuary and the neighbouring forests, quite unaware of anything unusual happening!

There is a slowly growing consciousness in India of the value of wildlife and wild places, and it is anticipated that at least in the sanctuaries and parks all the species now to be found will survive, to be an enduring source of enjoyment for the inhabitants of India as well as for those of the rest of the world.

POST OF HONOUR

