

Rhino Hunting with a Camera

IN THE

Jaldapara Sanctuary, Bengal.

(With 3 Photographs)

BY

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All the best photographs of Rhino taken in this sanctuary have been made by the flash light and trip wire method. From the photographer's point of view this has many disadvantages, the main one being that one does not see the Rhino personally and the only real thrill is in the development of the negative.

In 1944 there was a swamp about three miles South West of Nilpara where Rhino could generally be found feeding on aquatic roots in the early morning. On a good elephant, that is to say one which is not afraid of Rhino, it was possible to go into the swamp and get within about forty yards of a Rhino before he decided to move off. The disadvantages of photographing Rhino in this swamp were :—(i) That it was rarely possible to get very close to a Rhino, unless he happened to be feeding near one of the banks of the swamp which had adequate cover up to the water's edge, (ii) There was always the dark water line on the Rhino's body and (iii) It was never possible to get a photograph of the whole animal.

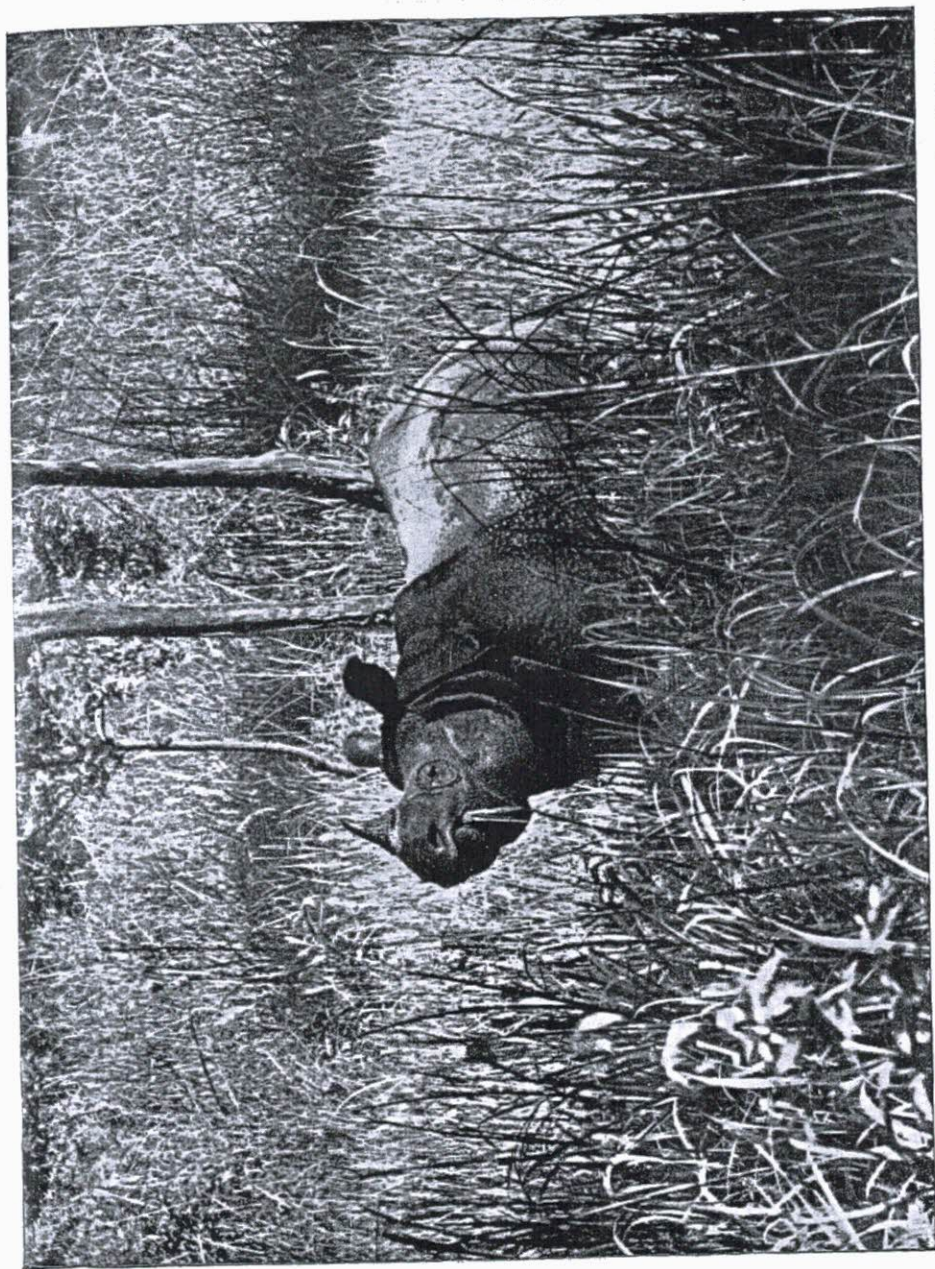
The swamp was about half a mile long and averaged three or four hundred yards across and there were many well worn Rhino tracks leading into it.

On one occasion, when off my elephant, I was fortunate in hearing a Rhino approaching the swamp from the surrounding jungle and I was able to take up a favourable position near the path he was on. The Kagra grass was rather thick between me and the path but I managed to get a good photograph of his head as he quenched his thirst before going into the water. This gave me the idea of building a machan which could command a good view of a Rhino path leading to the stream, using elephants or other



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“Eating peacefully.”



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“Curious but happy.”

machans as "stops" for other paths, and one or two elephants to go into the swamp and drive the Rhino in the swamp very quietly towards the path I would be watching. This scheme never came off as the swamp dried up the following year and thereafter Rhino were more scattered and difficult to find.

This swamp was probably caused by an over flow of the main Toorsa River during the rains and it may therefore be formed again during the monsoon of another year.

It must be remembered that Rhino, generally speaking, prefer thick jungle or areas of Kagra and it is in such localities that they spend most of their time, and where they feed. By day, they are rarely to be seen in open country, except when moving from one area of thick cover to another.

In patches of Kagra it is usual to hear a Rhino before seeing him and a Rhino can make an extra-ordinary selection of noises when alarmed. One noise may be likened to "blowing bubbles with great force" and another is rather like a rapid succession of "wind sucking".

It will therefore be appreciated that, in order to get a good photograph of a Rhino in the open, one must be prepared to spend many hours on the job and make frequent visits to the sanctuary. I think it is useless to take up a position in the open and attempt to drive Rhino with elephants towards this position. As soon as a Rhino thinks he is being driven, he will stampede and go into thick jungle rather than away from it and of course he moves very much quicker than an elephant.

My most successful hunt was with a single elephant. I left Nilpara at dawn and went due West across the Toorsa River. On the far side of the river I came across a typical Rhino dung heap, on which was some fresh dung steaming. Following up the tracks from here and still going West, we went in to some thick Kagra through which ambles a small clear stream. Very soon we heard a Rhino splashing in the stream. I then turned my elephant down the bank

into the stream in the hopes of getting a photograph of the Rhino in the stream before he was alarmed. I had a very good stern view of him at a range of about twenty yards as we entered the water but before I could get my elephant still and my camera focussed, the Rhino was off into thick Kagra up on the far bank. I could hear him not very far away but could not see him. This is quite usual in Kagra jungle and the Rhino seems to know what good cover it affords, moreover a Rhino has no cause to be frightened of an elephant.

We then went up into the Kagra on the far bank of the stream quite slowly and, as soon as I could spot the Rhino (I being on the pad had a better field of view through the Kagra than either the Mahout or the elephant), we stopped. The main idea was to make the Rhino quite happy about having an elephant grazing near him. Whenever the Rhino moved, we moved, but very slowly. He became very curious and, at one time, he started "blowing bubbles" when not more than twenty yards away. Fortunately my elephant (Lady Mary with Aiman Sing Mahout) did not mind these funny noises and just went on eating. As the Kagra was here about twelve feet high I could not do anything about taking photographs. The initiative was with the Rhino and as far as I was concerned, it could stay there.

Even in the thickest Kagra areas there are "lanes" down which one can get a reasonably uninterrupted view for twenty yards or so and I merely had to wait until the Rhino browsed in the direction of such a lane. He was now quite quiet and happy but knew that an elephant was very close to him and frequently looked up in our direction during the intervals of pulling up young grass. Lady Mary was of course making far more noise and movement than the Rhino as, apart from eating, she was using tufts of Kagra as a fly swat.

Eventually the Rhino moved into a fairly open bit of Kogra and I was able to get two quite useful photographs at a range of about twentyfive yards. I then tried to move



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“Close up of a Rhino in Kagra Jungle.”

in closer, very very slowly, but the Rhino became alarmed and went off in a canter. We then left him in peace.

Notes on Photographic Equipment.

Film. As a Rhino is a dark bulk, somewhat similar to an elephant from a photographic point of view, one should load up with the fastest film available (Kodak Super xx or Selo H.P.3). It is unlikely that a film will be over exposed. Moreover as with most cameras the size of the Rhino will probably be no more than half an inch on the negative, a considerable degree of enlargement will be necessary, and will call for fine grain development which does not give the maximum speed of the film.

Exposure. An elephant is rarely still and I think it unwise to take any photograph from an elephant at any speed slower than 1/100th of a second. The stop would vary according to the light on the Rhino and the hour of day from f. 3. 5, to f. 8. When in doubt use a larger stop but remember that the larger the aperture used the more accurate must the focussing be.

Camera. I think the ideal camera would be a Reflex with a fairly long focus lens. My own is a Rolleiflex which has the advantage of a focussing magnifier and also an automatic film winder, which facilitates taking a succession of shots very rapidly, but it has a very short focus lens, which means that I have to get within twenty to thirty yards of the animal in order to get a half inch Rhino on the negative. A first class miniature Camera, with a range finder and long focus lens, would also undoubtedly produce good results, but I have no experience of these precision instruments.