

The Indian Rhinoceros

By E. P. GEE

HOME OF INDIA'S RHINO

THOUSANDS pass it by every year, as they motor along the Grand Trunk Road of Assam. Only few of the local residents trouble to visit it. Yet here at Kaziranga, midway between Gauhati and Dibrugarh, within a mile of the main road, is one of the most famous game sanctuaries in the world.

Therein live in perfect security hundreds of rhino, wild buffalo, pig and various kinds of deer. A few bison (Gaur), tiger, elephant, other animals are also found there. And thousands of birds find safety there, geese, duck, herons, storks, partridges and numerous others.

In this large tract of unspoilt Nature, with its streams, bheels and patches of tree jungle, the country can be seen exactly as it was thousands of years ago. Giant elephant grass, 15 to 20 feet high in places, gives full protection to the wild creatures which thrive there. Tracks go in every direction over the low but slightly undulating ground.

The sanctuary came into being about 1906. It was then (only just in time) realized that the Great Indian Rhino was nearly extinct, and that bison and buffalo were becoming scarce. So the sanctuary was formed, and rhino have now increased to about three hundred, or even more. It is difficult to count the animals in a hundred and sixty odd square miles of thick grass jungle.

STUPID AND SHORT-TEMPERED

Kaziranga was opened to visitors in 1937. Before that only officials and their friends went there as a rule. But now you and I can go there at any time provided we get permission from the Divisional Forest Officer beforehand. You can stay in the inspection bungalow there, if it is not

occupied; and two fine inspection elephants—Akbar and Sher Khan—are available for visiting the sanctuary.

Rhino, being somewhat stupid and proverbially short-tempered, sometimes give a snort and charge. But usually they are placid creatures, and move away when approached nearer than about 50 yards. Elephants, instinctively scared of rhino, will generally bolt if charged.

The two forest elephants at Kaziranga, however, are staunch and their mahouts experienced and skilful. At the same time, a gash from a rhino is worth avoiding, so the mahouts use the utmost caution in approaching these horned animals. And should a rhino charge, as a cow with a calf often will do, the elephant is allowed to run for a short distance before being brought back again to observe its weird pursuer.

A gallop on elephant back from a rhino is a thrill worth experiencing. In fact one is often disappointed nowadays if one is not charged; and there is an entry in the visitors' book written by a disappointed couple, which reads: "Only charged by the Forest Department."

Indian buffaloes are more wary than rhino, and keep at a distance of about 80 yards. They go in herds, and are a great sight as they

Visitors enter the Sanctuary on elephant-back.

This large tusker forest elephant is dwarfed by the giant elephant-grass.





This cow rhino with a calf at beel did not charge, but moved away. E. P. Gee

stand facing you, often with a fine bull among them. They have become friendly with their armour-plated fellows, and two were once seen lying in a bheel within one foot of a rhino.

Herds of domesticated buffalo are kept by Nepali herdsmen on the outskirts of Kaziranga, and the tame cows often mate with wild bulls. The resultant calves can be seen in the villages,—sturdier and healthier than the others,—but more difficult to manage. And later, when they themselves calve, their milk yield is much less than that of the other cow buffaloes.

A few bison (Gaur) are supposed to live in the furthest part of the sanctuary, but have not been seen for some time. They may have migrated to the Mikir Hills nearby, where bison have always existed.

ANIMAL FRIENDSHIPS

Sambhur, Swamp Deer and Barking Deer abound in great numbers in the sanctuary. And it is interesting to note that a common enemy, as in the case of man, often unites animals otherwise diverse in character. The tiger is the sworn enemy of deer, buffalo and pig. These three, therefore, have instinctively formed friendships with rhino, of whom the tiger is afraid. A sort of lease-lend arrangement ensues. Deer, in particular, graze freely with rhino; and alertly give warning of impending danger from tiger or man to their more shortsighted guardians.

It is hoped that the Forest Department will be able to carry out some improvements at Kaziranga. The sanctuary could be made even more accessible to visitors by the making of a forest road right up to it. And a tourist's hut at the end of this road would provide convenient accommodation to those going out in the very early morning.

A large clearance in front of the proposed hut would enable visitors on arrival to see animals in the evening as they come out to graze.

PRESERVATION-MINDED

A ready supply of information about the sanctuary and its inmates would lead to the creation not only of increased public interest, but also of the preservation-mindedness so much needed nowadays.

Recently some friends of mine, whose bungalow overlooks part of the sanctuary, were watching a herd of wild buffalo graze. The herd moved on, but a cow had left a very young calf crying there all by itself. A peculiar incident. Possibly a tiger or two had frightened the herd away.

My friends rescued the calf, and put it on the bottle. It thrived. Several days later the herd returned, and there was the mother searching for her baby, which was promptly returned to her.

If we, the trustees for future generations, were all as preservation-minded as this, there would be no fear for the survival of our valuable fauna.

ANIMAL WHICH NEARLY BECAME EXTINCT

“AS extinct as the rhino” might easily have become an Indian proverb. Forty odd years ago rhino in India were almost completely exterminated. But the timely

formation of sanctuaries at the beginning of the present century only just saved this ungainly but intensely interesting creature for posterity.

Rhino, apparently, once flourished all over India. Fossilized remains are to be found in the U.P., the Narbada Valley, Madras, and presumably in most parts of India and Pakistan. It is recorded that in the sixteenth century these animals existed in the Punjab and as far west as Peshawar.

But nowadays rhino are confined only to a very few areas of North-east India and Nepal. India has various sanctuaries formed by the Forest Department, in North Bihar, North Bengal and in Assam.

SACROSANCT

In the Nepalese Terai rhino are strictly protected and cannot be shot except by important persons with the permission of the Maharaja. In India, of course, all rhino are sacrosanct both within the sanctuaries and without. They may not be shot unless specially proclaimed. And even when a stray animal is proclaimed for destruction, its horn is a valuable item of forest revenue and must be surrendered.

The chief sanctuary for rhino is Kaziranga in the centre of Assam on the south bank of the Brahmaputra. This was formed about 1906, when there were only some dozen rhino surviving. Now under strict preservation they have multiplied to somewhere between two and four hundred.

In the Douars of North Bengal, the Jaldapara Game Sanctuary was formed in 1932, and the thirty or so rhino there, which were faced with extermination, have now increased to about sixty. In North Bihar a few rhino exist in the districts of Purnea and

Champanan, but unless stricter protection is accorded them they appear to be in danger of gradually disappearing.

Besides the Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros, to give him his full name, two other smaller species used to exist in Assam and North and East Bengal, but now have actually become extinct or nearly extinct. One is the Javan Rhino which does not have the tubercles, like heads of rivets on a boiler, on its body. The other is the Sumatran Rhino which is hairy and has two horns. Both these animals are supposed to prefer forests and hills to the plains, but it is doubtful if they still exist.

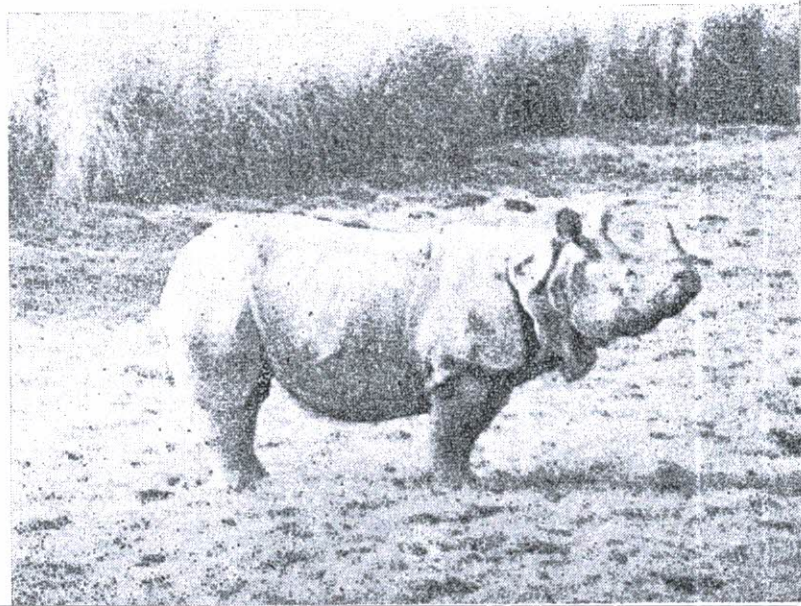
REASONS FOR RARITY

The rhino is heavily armoured and well protected against all other animals. Tigers avoid him; and elephants, which cannot travel as fast as rhino, are scared of him. But the unfortunate rhino cannot compete with man. He falls a very easy victim if a pit is dug for him and camouflaged over. And once caught in a shallow pit, or even in quicksand, he cannot get out. In the olden days his horn could be hacked off and sold quite easily for Rs. 1,500 or more, until forest guards and police reduced this sort of thing to a minimum.

Moreover, he is very easily shot, as he is rather stupid, proverbially short-tempered, and

This large bull rhino charged us. Our elephant fled, but later returned and enabled us to take this picture.

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always returns to the same place to perform his toilet. Sit up over a large heap of rhino dung, and sooner or later you will see one of these grotesque and prehistoric-like monsters. Moreover, they are very fond of grazing on fields of growing rice, and during the rains they come in large numbers for this succulent food, forming an easy target to would-be poachers.

Rhino horns were, and probably still are, greatly famed throughout the East—especially in China—as a reputed aphrodisiac. The meat also is very highly appreciated, and even the urine is considered by some to be antiseptic.

Zoological gardens of Britain and the U.S.A. have recently acquired specimens of the Great Indian Rhino from Kaziranga. Last year a half grown male was caught and sent to London, where he has been christened "Mohan." He has become very tame, is doing extremely well and has grown quite a lot. And only just recently a pair was captured and sent to Chicago.

The appreciation shown by other countries of these animals might well serve as a reminder to India of the rich store of fauna in her forests. A reminder, too, that their study and preservation in this mechanical and worrying age are considerably worth while.

Bird Watching in Colombo

By D. F. ARMITAGE

IN the first issue of *Loris*, Vol. 1, No. 1, November, 1936, Dr. Lucius Nicholls wrote an article entitled "The Birds of a Colombo Garden," in which he detailed seventy-one species which he had definitely identified. The volume is, unfortunately, no longer obtainable, but there is a copy in the Society's Library at the Dehiwela Zoo, and any member interested in the birds of Colombo should make a point of reading the article. The birds were all seen in the garden of a bungalow in MacCarthy Road, and also in a small patch of waste and swampy ground adjoining which is now, alas, no more.

There are, however, quite a lot of other species to be seen in Colombo and the following can be considered fairly common:—

FLYCATCHERS

The Indian Brown Flycatcher (*Muscicapa latirostris*). A North-East Monsoon migrant.

WARBLERS

The Ceylon Wren Warbler (*Prinia inornata insularis*).—Rather difficult to view properly as it is very restless and has rather skulking habits.

SUNBIRDS

The Purple Sunbird (*Cinnyris asiatica asiatica*).

PARROTS

The Ceylon Loriquet (*Loriculus beryllinus*).—Can often be seen on the tops of flowering trees.

HAWKS

The Ceylon Shikra (*Astur badius badius*).—The call, a two-syllabled scream is often imitated by the White-vented Drongo (*Dicrurus Coerulescens leucopygialis*).

SANDPIPERS

The Common Sandpiper (*Tringa hypoleucos*).

Dr. Nicholls mentions a Southern Indian Roller (*Coracias benglensis indica*) as having once spent a few weeks on the now defunct Ladies' Golf Links and it is interesting to record that in January and February, 1949, two birds were seen on Independence Square. This species is certainly an uncommon visitor.

Colombo, however, seems to be an excellent place for seeing unusual birds, and in recent years the following species have been recorded:—

The Rose-coloured Starling (*Pastor roseus*).—A young bird was seen on the 17th December, 1948, in the Buller's Road Cemetery and the following day on the Ridgeway Golf Course.