

FAUNA OF CONSERVATION AREAS
ZOOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA

FAUNA OF SUNDARBAN MANGROVE
ECOSYSTEM, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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Edited by the Director, Zoological Survey of India.
1989

b. Ground Dwellers

The forest floor of Sundarban is the domain of the Royal Bengal Tiger, *Panthera tigris* (Linnaeus). This forest is also the home of many ground dwelling wildlife species. Among mammals, ground fauna comprises of Fishing Cat, *Felis viverrina* Bennett, Spotted Deer, *Cervus axis* (Erleben) (Plate 6, fig. 2), Wild Boar, *Sus scrofa* Linnaeus (Plate 8, fig. 3), Mongoose, *Herpestes* spp. Otter, *Lutra lutra* Linnaeus and Pangolin, *Manis pentadactyla* Linnaeus. The common mammal species of the forest are the Wild Boar and the Spotted Deer. The Wild Boars feed on underground tubers but also relish dead fishes, prawns, crabs, molluscs and sea turtle eggs. The Spotted Deer preferably browse on leaves, twigs and fruits of Keora (*Sonneratia apetala*) 'Baen' (*Avicennia officinalis*) and 'Gnewa' (*Excoecaria agallocha*). Herds of deer follow troops of Rhesus monkey from one Keora tree to another to pick up what the monkeys drop from tree tops while feeding. Two or three deer are seen in a herd inside the forest but in the open meadow the number increases to 40-50.

The Swamp Deer, *Cervus devaucelli* Cuvier, Hog deer, *Axis porcinus* Zimmermann and Barking Deer, *Muntiacus muntiac* Zimmermann were also present even at the fag end of the last century but now extinct from this part of the country. The Javan Rhino or Lesser One-horned Rhino, *Rhinoceros sondaicus* Desmarest and the Wild Buffalo, *Bubalus bubalis* (Linnaeus) have also become extinct from this region. The last authentic record of Javan Rhino from Sundarban is in 1893, which is based on a mounted specimen present in the Indian Museum, Calcutta.

Among the existing mammals the magnificent tiger has got the pride place as the top carnivorous animal occurring in the hazardous environment of the Sundarban. It leads an almost amphibious life and is quite capable of crossing wide rivers. It has well adapted itself in this difficult terrain which is characterised by sharp pneumatophores, muddy substratum, innumerable rivers and creeks with tidal rhythm, variable salinity and lack of freshwater source. It feeds on pigs, deer, even on fishes, crabs and water monitors. The Wild Pig constitutes the substantial proportion of its diet as the majority of tiger scats are predominated by the presence of pig hairs. This is in contrast to the common belief that the tiger mainly preys on Spotted Deer. It is generally believed that the tigers in this mangrove forest do not have