

JOURNAL
OF THE
BENGAL NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

VOL. 29

No. 3

DECEMBER 1957

THE JALDAPARA GAME SANCTUARY, WEST BENGAL

By

E. D. AVARI, F.Z.S.

Honorary Secretary, Game Federation of Bengal.

The occurrence of the Indian one horned Rhinoceros in Bengal often comes as a surprise to many people. The usual impression is that the distribution of the Rhinoceros in India is limited to the riverain forests of Assam. The last stronghold of this truly wonderful species, in fact, extends from the Nepal Terai and certain areas in the Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar divisions of West Bengal to Assam. In Bengal as in Assam, the Government particularly the Forest Directorate, has with commendable farsightedness demarcated certain areas as Sanctuaries in which the Rhinoceros may stand a chance of survival against the advancing encroachment of over population and civilization, a problem which is unfortunately acute in the state of West Bengal with its desperate shortage of living room for its countless refugees.

The main Sanctuary in West Bengal is the Jaldapara Game Sanctuary situated in the Eastern Dooars, and broadly speaking, bordering Cooch Behar in the South, Bhutan in the North and Assam in the East. It is comprised partly of the Madarihath range of the Jalpaiguri Forest Division and parts of the Nilpara and Chilapatta ranges of the Buxa Forest Division. The total area of the Sanctuary is about 40 square miles mostly composed of riverain forests spread over abandoned courses of the Teesta river and its tributaries south of the Nilpara-Madarihath road. Possessing ideal cover for the



Ektachrome

Great Indian Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*)

Jaldapara Game Sanctuary.

Photo — E. D. Avari

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Rhinoceros, being overgrown with tall grass and reeds, with several low lying isolated swamps, this type of country grows the favourite food of the Rhino, wild ginger and the tender shoots of marsh reeds.

The Sanctuary named as such in the early thirties of the present century, has had during its existence an extremely chequered career. Poaching was rampant in the same decade. Swarms of Assamese and Mech poachers, locally known as '*Palawans*' crossed over into Bengal, and using cheap Bhutan muzzle loading guns thinned the Rhino population to such an extent that at one period not more than a dozen animals were believed to have been in the area. The Rhino, however, has managed to hold its own against severe odds and with the renewed interest in its welfare shown by the Government and sportsmen since Independence has considerably increased in number. A rough estimate of the population at the moment would be about fifty, which, considering the small area of the sanctuary can be deemed satisfactory. It is doubtful if it can support a larger population, since the cantankerous nature of the Bull and the numerous fights which develop as a result causes quite a number of deaths. These fights usually start over the favours of a female during the breeding season. In recent years quite a number of Rhino calves have been seen in the sanctuary. Rhinos feed mostly at night, normally on grass and the type of food mentioned earlier, but in areas where cultivation adjoins the sanctuary, they do feed off paddy and other crops when these are in season. During the day they retire to the thickest cover within the Sanctuary.

To see the Rhino, one should set out on Elephants as early as possible in the morning. They may be observed in the streams running through the Sanctuary or can be tracked from the river bed into the bordering grass jungles. The first indication, unless they are actually sighted in the grass jungle is usually a sharp snort. Their smell may panic the Elephants. An elephant which will face a charging Rhino is most desirable. If the Rhino decides to make a bolt for it, the only indication of its passage through the tall thick grass is the whirring noise produced by its rushing through accompanied by occasional grunts. It is possible then, if the approach has been made in



Rhinoceros on river bed

the correct manner, to drive it out into the open river bed. The river bed provides an ideal ground for observation and Photography and being out in the open it is also easier to avoid a charge. If it charges this is often sudden and is usually dangerous. But the charge may be just a demonstration. It is best to take the opportunity of photographing without losing much time after which it is wise to leave him to his own business. On no account should one dismount from the elephant, or be vociferous or gesticulate after having sighted the Rhino.

In addition to the Rhinoceros, the Sanctuary holds all the other game animals except the Gaur and Wild Buffalo. Swamp Deer used to occur in the Sanctuary but have not been seen in recent years. During a morning's ride, Sambhur, Hog deer or Barking Deer may be seen. Tigers are sighted fairly often. Wild Elephants sometimes prove to be a nuisance. We know of an instance when quite a number of V.I.P's were chivvied around by a wild Tusker who had amorous intentions towards the Cow Elephants they were riding. A magnificent young Tusker even followed a party to the outskirts of the Forest. One could easily gauge its strength by watching it pulling down a few huts and yanking a truck left in gear thereby shearing the gear teeth.

It remains to be seen whether the Rhino will survive against the necessary and imaginary needs of man. The sanctuary situated in the middle of cultivated and arable land, with private holdings abutting into it cannot be said to be in a safe position. A recent proposal to build a diagonal bund through it to safeguard a highway, will, if carried through, prove disastrous, as one section of the Sanctuary will dry up and the other be flooded. It is unfortunate that certain portions of the body of the Rhinoceros are imagined to give a filip to one of the basic urges of human nature. This makes the Rhino a much desired target of the mercenary poacher.

The Sanctuary is situated approximately about 120 rail miles from Darjeeling and a day and a half journey by rail from Calcutta. There is a 1st Class Forest Bungalow and Youth Hostel about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles away from the Sanctuary. An

excellent war-time Airfield borders the Sanctuary within a stone's throw from the Forest Bungalow, and a private Air Company maintains a service twice a week. As the Forest Bungalow is intended for the use of touring forest officers, those desirous of visiting the Sanctuary should write well ahead of their visit to the Divisional Forest Officer, Cooch Behar. Visitors will have to make their own arrangement for food. The Forest Department will complete a tourist lodge quite close to the Sanctuary within the year 1958. We are not certain whether this will cater to the needs of the people less blessed with money. If it does not, it will indeed be a pity as popularising it with the Indian public would prove more beneficial to the Sanctuary in the long run.

OBSERVATION ON THE INDIAN BUFFALO AND ITS SHIKAR

Compared with the domestic species, the wild Buffalo is a giant. The height at shoulder attaining 16 or 17 hands. In my opinion, the wild Buffalo is the most aggressive and dangerous animal, when wounded. At times he will charge an elephant or the hunter even when unwounded. He is also very hard to kill, if the first shot does not floor him. It seems that he gets over the shock of the first bullet, and I know a man who put in 17 bullets into a beast before he bagged him. The Buffalo when wounded and followed up, waits with his head on one side, and horns lowered, ready for the charge. Another stratagem resorted to, is to hark back on his tracks, wait at the side and then charge the unwary hunter, following the tracks. A herd of cows with calves are specially dangerous.