

FRANK B. SIMSON

Rhinos, Javan and Indian

Frank Simson's Letters on Sport in Eastern Bengal were based on diary notes kept during his postings in various districts over a period spanning nearly four decades. Things had 'changed greatly' over these years: Kassimbazar, the best place to find tigers had none left and there were no wild boar around in Noakhali. But the most spectacular decline was that of the two species of rhinos he had shot. His is one of the few good accounts of the Javan rhino which he encountered in the Sunderbans: it disappeared altogether soon after. The salt and tidal lands retained much of their cover, but even a limited amount of pressure proved too much for the Javan rhino. The larger Indian one-horned rhino had contracted in terms of its range but was still seen in the Brahmaputra valley's chauris or wet grasslands in Assam. Simson was an acute observer of not only the big and small game but also of the varied terrain of Bengal. The Javan rhino now survives in only two places in South-east Asia—a small reserve in southern Vietnam and in Ujung Kulon national park, Java, Indonesia. Simson was among the few who shot and wrote about it in India.

LETTER NO. 47

I wish I had had more experience in shooting the rhinoceros, for it is to be got in Eastern Bengal by any one who has time and opportunity though only in the distant outskirts of the province or almost on the sea shore. There are two kinds of rhinoceros in Bengal, *R. indicus* and *R. sondaicus*. The first is the larger and is found where Mymensing joins Assam, on the east of the Brahmapootra, and in

Assam, and exists all along the base of the Himalayan slopes to the north of Rungpore and Purneah but westward of Purneah it does not belong to the area of Eastern Bengal.

When I was appointed to that inferior sporting station Backergunge I thought to myself that I might at any rate shoot a rhinoceros; and I will tell you how the deed was accomplished. I knew the animal abounded in the Soonderbunds and was to be found all the way from the mouth of the Hooghly to the mouth of the Megna; this is the chief habitat of the lesser rhinoceros. Occasionally one has been killed to the south of Tippera and Chittagong. The one now in the London Zoological Gardens was captured when very young between Chittagong and Arracan, as it was crossing a muddy river. The whole establishment of Government khedda elephants happened to be on the march when news was brought that a little rhinoceros was in difficulties in some mud, and with the aid of these elephants the animal was taken alive and did well in captivity.

I found that no rhinoceros has ever been known near headquarters at Backergunge, but that the Soonderbund folk and the English planters who had taken up Soonderbund lands reported that they were plentiful between their settlements and the shores of the Bay of Bengal, and I persuaded the judge to accompany me in a trip to the Bay. Budderuddeen was not with me in those days, nor any shikarry of any value to compare to him; so I got what information I could through the police, who knew shikarries who used to procure venison from the more southern tracts of mangrove and soondry trees. At last I procured the services of two men who for good consideration agreed to take us up to some rhinoceroses, but strongly advised us to confine our attentions to spotted deer and jungle-fowl, as the rhinoceros was a fierce beast, not to be stopped by a bullet.

The country for the sport was most peculiar, for the most part devoid of any water that was not salt; the greater part of the soil was covered by the spring-tides: it was intersected by deep tidal nullahs with muddy banks. The good ground was at least as far off as boats with relays of rowers could reach in two nights' and a day's row, not far from a village which had been established by a colony of Arracanese Mughs; known as 'Isla Foolzurree.'

We got a comfortable large boat for ourselves and a commodious and fast-pulling boat for the attendants, to serve also as a cook-boat. We loaded both boats with large jars of good water for drinking

and cooking purposes, and started down stream about 4.30 P.M., rowing all night and taking advantage of tides under the direction of the shikarries who knew the streams. We soon left regular cultivation and well-populated regions and sailed and rowed all day down streams thickly fringed with trees. Here and there we came to marshy places covered with very high grass, and flags, and marsh plants. In these tigers, buffaloes, and rhinoceros were to be found occasionally; crocodiles were very numerous, and lovely kingfishers of a kind I had never seen before were common. On the second day we got to the rhinoceros land.

All the way down the judge and I had discussed as to where a rhinoceros should be hit. The judge had killed plenty near the Brahmapootra churs, but off elephants, and he argued for aiming at the shoulder and the neighbourhood of the heart. I declared that I would not fire if I could help it save just behind the ear. We both thought that the hide of a rhinoceros was proof against anything but a heavy bullet projected from a strong charge of powder. I have since come to the conclusion that, during life at least, the hide of a rhinoceros is not much more impenetrable than that of an old urna buffalo. My battery carried bullets fourteen to the pound. The judge had a heavy single rifle that carried a thing like a small cannon-ball, and required a coolie to carry till the time for use arrived. We had no luck the first afternoon, but saw spotted deer and plenty of tracks of both rhinoceros and tigers. I shot a large crow with ball after we got to the boats, and this rather raised our credit with the shikarries; they were to scout for game early next morning and we were to await their reports.

Next morning, after breakfast, one shikarry returned and said rhinoceros had been found, and that the other shikarry was on the watch. We had to go some distance in small canoes, and then we landed and had to walk over a most extraordinary hard kind of ground. We marched under thick green foliage and among trunks of fair-sized trees; but from the very wide-spreading roots of these trees there grew crops of stumps bigger than ordinary carrots, most difficult to travel among, and very trying to the ankles. Here and there were dense thickets of grassy or shrubby underwood, and large patches of that huge crackling fern called 'dinkybon'; the soil was generally covered with an inch or two of mud, and sometimes there were patches of short turf. Generally you could see under the trees

for some distance; and if beaters could have been got, deer might have been driven past gunners posted in ambuscade.

After a very long trudge in this trying walking ground we came upon the second shikarry, and a council of war was held. We were each to take only one attendant to carry a spare gun, and to go as silently as possible. I took my most sporting chuprassy and two smooth-bores, one by Sam Smith and one by Joe Manton. The judge, I think, had a double rifle and his man carried the heavy single rifle before mentioned. After a little the shikarry made signs to stop, and after a little reconnoitring he came back and pointed to a patch of dinkybon, and whispered that there was a rhinoceros in it, and that he would now make his salaam and climb up a tree, and leave the rest to us. On this all the other natives declared that they must go up trees, and they all salaamed and went up trees accordingly.

The judge and I agreed to go, one on one side and one on the other of the patch, and to come together at the first call, for both of us knew that two weapons might be required; I went to the left and the judge to the right. Peering about, presently I saw that something was moving in the dry fern-bush, which was about ten feet high, so I stood by the trunk of a tree about twenty-five yards from the fern, and put the Joe Manton gun against the tree on full-cock, and held the Sam Smith ready. Soon I saw a nose poked out, then the eye, and then the ear of a rhinoceros; as soon as this came out I let fly, and you can scarcely conceive the row which followed—something between the roar of an elephant and the neigh of a horse, but far stronger. The smoke hung, and as it passed I saw a rhinoceros standing, looking directly towards me. He stood a minute. I knew it was no use to fire at this lowered head; there is no vulnerable place there, and the ball would have glanced. I called to the judge and said, 'Here he is in front, looking at me!' but I did not move from the trunk of the tree, and I do not know if the rhinoceros distinctly made me out; they are said to have bad sight. The animal turned round, and as he did so I shot him high in the shoulder and he bolted. I followed, but was instantly stopped, for there lay a rhinoceros stone dead. There had been two in the bush, and my ball behind the ear had killed the first. After the judge and I had made sure that the beast was really dead, we went after the other. The blood had gushed out on the trees and was frothy; we argued

that the ball had penetrated the lungs and would be mortal. After going a little way further we considered that we should certainly lose ourselves, so we stopped and retraced our steps to the dead rhinoceros, and, after much shouting, got our attendants to come to us.

The next thing was to cut off the head and send it to the boats. This was no easy task. I had an ordinary sheathed hunting-knife, and the judge had a large pocket-knife; but these were far too small for the purpose, and it took us nearly an hour cutting, hacking, and twisting before the head was got off. It was then tied with jungle creepers to a thick stick cut for the purpose, and sent off to the boats on the shoulders of two men.

We then spent some hours trying to get more rhinoceroses. We saw, I think, six; but they were on the move, and either smelt or heard us, and we never got near enough for deadly action. The judge, who was an excellent shot, fired and wounded some animals; but no good was done. The walking was at times most difficult: the trees and foliage were characteristic of Soonderbund jungle, such as are to be found nowhere else in India proper; tigers and deer evidently abounded. It was impossible to stalk animals from a distance—first, because the walking was difficult; secondly, because of the fern which crackled as man or animal passed through it. I was transferred to Noakholly soon afterwards, and never revisited these parts: but the judge went again; he could get no gentleman to accompany him, and had a few natives with him. He put up a tiger and severely wounded it; in searching for this animal, a chuprassy came upon it and was killed. After this the judge went no more. These places are said to be most unhealthy for Europeans; fevers of the worst type are soon contracted, and the Soonderbunds are considered deadly if any stay is made in them.

But there is no doubt that between the northern parts of Backergunge and the shores of the Bay of Bengal there spreads a country full of large game, and where a sportsman, if he could retain his health and learn the localities and plan out the proper methods for shooting, might obtain grand sport. There are no elephants to be got; there is no drinkable water; there are no villages where supplies can be got; there are no roads nor bridges, and ever recurring deep muddy tidal salt-streams. An enterprising sportsman, with a good steam-launch, might perhaps be able to work the country; but during my time I never heard that any Europeans had

been able systematically or effectively to hunt up any portion of it. Every now and then some such short expedition as I made is undertaken, and occasionally some English gentleman connected with the ownership of Soonderbund grants kills a few tigers and rhinoceroses and deer; but generally fever puts a stop to his ardour for sport. The forests are, however, gradually disappearing before cultivation, in spite of the insalubrity of the soil, and villages are springing up, and steamers go through the deep channels, and native craft through the smaller streams.

I never heard anything more of the rhinoceros I wounded or those fired into by the judge; but immediately after I left the district the horn of a rhinoceros was offered for sale in the bazaar of Burrisawel, the head station of the district, and the judge had an opinion that this was the horn belonging to the second animal of the two to which we had been taken by the shikarries.

This rhinoceros seems to be a harmless animal, feeding on branches of trees and the rank succulent herbage of muddy swamps. It never appears to visit cultivated places or to damage crops; unless roused it has no murderous propensity; it kills no other animal, and its size and thick hide protect it from the tiger. The unhealthy climate of the Soonderbunds has prolonged its existence to this date; but ere long, as these salt and tidal lands are brought under rice- and jute-cultivation, the animal will disappear. In the struggle for existence it will not be able to fight the battle by adapting itself to change even to the extent that tigers and hogs seem to do; these shift their quarters, and constantly appear in new localities.

LETTER NO. 48

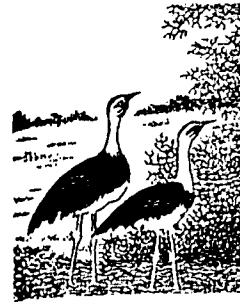
The last letter referred to *Rhinoceros sondaicus*; but the *Rhinoceros indicus* generally referred to as the rhinoceros of Bengal by sportsmen, is a different and a larger animal, inhabiting extensive swamps and marshes, where the grass is the tallest and densest to be found, and where the jungle called in Mymensing 'taradhām' occupies large spaces of soft muddy soil, which I should think would only suit heavy animals in the dry season. In these thick grass jungles no man on foot can make his way: he must either follow paths made by elephants, buffaloes, and rhinoceros, or cut his way through them, or go on elephants; and it is on elephants alone that the sport of rhinoceros shooting has been carried on in the regions of the

Brahmapootra churs and in the valleys of Assam, and in the Terai at the base of the Himalayas about Rungpore and Purneah.

I went after a rhinoceros at times; but neither in the neighbourhood of the Brahmapootra nor in the north of Purneah did I ever see one. If you can accompany any sportsman who is acquainted with good rhinoceros-ground and have leisure and desire to kill these animals, you will have better luck. I neither knew the country nor Europeans nor natives in it, and contented myself with hog-hunting and tiger-shooting; I cannot therefore relate tales of rhinoceros-slaughter in which I took part.

But numbers of other sportsmen and friends killed them yearly, and their skulls were to be seen in the verandahs of many houses in Mymensing and Dinagepore and Rungpore. From looking at these it was at once seen that the brain took up only a small space in the huge bony head, and that bullets in the head need not necessarily prove mortal. Well-directed shots, however, seemed easily to have pierced to the brain; and from all I could learn the chief thing in rhinoceros-shooting was to manage to get as close to the animal as possible, and the only difficulty in doing this was the great fear elephants had of approaching a rhinoceros at all. Sometimes these animals are pugnacious, and when they charge the line of elephants the latter animal, as a rule, takes to flight and cannot be brought to face the rhinoceros at all. I have heard stories and seen pictures of elephants having been knocked over by rhinoceroses; still I never heard of any serious accident that had occurred. An elephant that will face a fighting rhinoceros is a most valuable animal. Much depends on the mahout; but elephants are curiously uncertain in temper and courage. My best elephant had a great reputation for good behaviour with rhinoceroses, and I killed scores of tigers from her back; nevertheless, even with Sowdaugor, the pluckiest mahout I ever had, she ran away—positively declined to be brought close up to a plucky rat: the courageous little animal stuck out its fur, squeaked, and jumped towards the ponderous elephant, which tucked up its trunk, screamed, backed away, and could not be brought forward, though I tried for quite a quarter of an hour to force the elephant to close quarters.

Excerpted from Letters on Sport in Eastern Bengal (London: R. H. Porter, 1886).



J. H. BALDWIN

Hunting the Houbara

The houbara or McQueen's bustard is a ground-living bird that was shot by zamindars, princes and officers because it was a 'gourmet's delight'. But the bird had excellent camouflage and stalking it was a challenge for the most experienced shikari. Baldwin, a veteran hunter, had ranged across Bengal, central India and the North West Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh). Only our obsession with big game of the four-footed kind blinds us to how much of shikar consisted of tracking and shooting birds. Partridge and grouse, peafowl and houbara were especially welcome to the British, inveterate meat-eaters who wanted a change from chicken and mutton!

The birds of the open grasslands included the great Indian bustard, Asia's heaviest land bird, now a rare species. Though never a delicacy like the houbara, it was a large ground-dweller weighing up to 14 kg, making it a large quarry. The florican was another such bird of the grasslands. While wildlife and forests are often seen as synonymous, an amazing variety of birds lived in scrub, desert and grassland.

The chase of the bird requires such caution and patience as would sorely try the temper of even a practised deer-stalker.—WHITE'S 'Selborne.'

THE INDIAN BUSTARD

Description

Male. Height—From 3½ to 4 feet.

Bill.—2 inches in length, of a yellowish colour, nearly straight and pointed.

C 200.c. 3743

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