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INDIA'S ARMOURED GIANTS

By Dennis O'Connor

Dieter & Mary Plage/Bruce Coleman



A two-ton pachyderm takes to the water

At a remote sanctuary, travellers observe the rare one-horned rhino from the safety of an elephant's back

JUST TWENTY YARDS away an Indian rhinoceros blinked its myopic eyes and sniffed the wind suspiciously. A snake-necked white ibis, feasting on parasites, pecked across the rhino's leathery haunches. As I lifted my camera the ibis took wing, warning its short-sighted host of our presence.

The mahout massaged the trembling elephant behind her ears, silently urging her to hold her ground. Glancing down at her scarred flanks I began to share her nervousness. The rhino grunted low, like an echo in a barrel. Suddenly it charged. The elephant began to turn but a sharp command from the mahout brought her to a halt. Galloping with surprising speed the rhino rumbled towards us. Two tons of armour-plated mythology jerked to a stop a few feet away, tossing its massive horned head in irritation.

Hindu legend says that once, long ago, Lord Krishna hoped to use the rhino in battle. He called the animal forth and covered it with armour, but it proved too stupid to obey orders and was driven back into the forest. Watching it stand before us, a grey block of obstinacy, we had a glimpse back to those days of ancient legends and then even further back to the Pliocene when rhinos first roamed the earth. After a few minutes the rhino forgot about us and wandered back into the elephant grass. This was the first of many encounters with the cantankerous rhinos of Kaziranga National Park.

Four days earlier, my wife Jan and I had left Darjeeling and travelled 800 lurching miles by steam locomotive to the isolated north-eastern Indian state of Assam. Coated with coal dust, we left the train at Gauhati and

took a local bus 135 miles down National Highway 37, the region's only road. After nine hours of near misses and washboard road we arrived at Kaziranga National Park. Its 166 square miles of primeval jungle are cradled between the tea estates of the Mikir Hills and the floodplain of the Brahmaputra River. Kaziranga is probably the finest wild animal park east of Kenya. During our nine-day stay we saw more large animals than one would reasonably expect to see in a lifetime. In this region of India swamp deer, bears, elephants, tigers, wild buffalo, leopards, reptiles of all kinds and a large number of birds have found sanctuary. But it is the rare one-horned Indian rhinoceros, and the open plains where they can be seen easily, that are the sources of Kaziranga's growing fame.

The Indian-Victorian buildings of the government tourist compound, where the bus left us, were surrounded by neatly manicured rows of Assam's most famous export, tea. Twenty women were clustered in the rows, their hands flicking over the plants.

Once inside the compound's high gates, which are intended to discourage any night-prowling predators, we were surrounded by the colonial ambience of the British Raj. The front porch of the forest warden's office, guarded by armed sentries and decorated with the enormous skulls of elephants, water buffalo and rhinos, added to the frontier atmosphere. After a chat with the warden, I reserved our elephant for the following day and bought a camera permit.

A sleepless night filled with strange noises and eager anticipation of our first excursion into the bush came to an end well before sunrise when the houseman presented us with a steaming pot of tea and some sweet biscuits.

Forty minutes later we stood shivering in the pre-dawn chill along with the elephants, which knelt on the ground waiting for their mahouts to throw the mattress-like saddle pads on their backs. Once we were mounted and had begun the long trek toward the outskirts of the jungle, we fell into a lumbering line of four elephants, their mahouts and 16 passengers.

A few moments later we encountered that first rhino. Disturbed and suspicious over our intrusion, the rhino charged. We were instantly engaged in a contest of wills, relying only on the mahout's steadfast control of his nervous elephant in the face of the rhino's instinctive rage. It was a mock charge this time, but the rhino does not always bluff. More than one of the elephants in our group

A rhino crosses a track in Kaziranga National Park just a few yards in front of a party of tourists

Photograph: Erwin A. Bauer



bore the scars of a rhino's teeth. It surprised me to learn that, unlike its African cousins, the Indian rhino does not use its horn as a weapon but inflicts a severe gash with sharp lower incisors which thrust forward. The rhino's horn, in fact, is not a horn at all, but a matted mass of thick fibre that grows directly from the skin and is not connected to the skull.

Indian rhinos live in overlapping territories amidst the marshy elephant grass characteristic of Assam. Extremely short-sighted, they rely on a keen sense of smell to navigate, often using dung piles as 'scent signposts' to mark their territory.

Rhinos graze during the early morning and spend the afternoon in mud wallows or lakes to avoid the parasites and flies that infest the folds between their thick body plates. When we approached one large bull, content in his small wallow, he sprang up with amazing agility. The black of his muddy belly contrasted with the chalky grey of his dry back, giving him the appearance of a piebald dinosaur. Snorting and shaking his head, the rhino galloped off far faster than our elephant could follow.

Second only in size to the two-horned African white rhino, a full-grown male Indian rhinoceros can measure over six feet high at the shoulders with a girth of 11 feet behind the withers. At two tons, an adult rhino has few natural enemies — only tigers, which sometimes kill calves, and humans which dare to challenge its fearsome bulk. However, contagious diseases such as anthrax, spread by domestic animals, are also a danger.

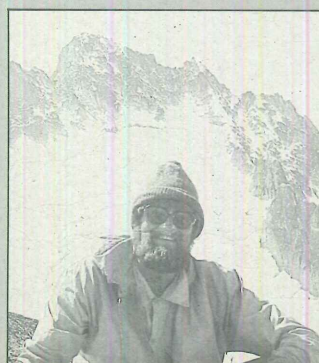
Fierce fights between bulls during the rutting months of April and May occasionally result in fatalities. The mating chases of rhinos can also be violent, and sometimes cows are killed by bulls or die later as a result of serious injuries. An older bull is sometimes driven away by younger competitors and may seek refuge in villages that ring the park. This is a great windfall for the townspeople because the rhino, now dependent on them for food, grows tame and becomes a source of income as the villagers advertise the beast's presence to tourists.

Rhinos give birth after an 18-month gestation period to one calf at a time. When moving through established territory the calf will lead the way, but if threatened it stays very close to its mother. We were lucky to see a mother and calf at close range, but from a safe vantage point on top of an elephant. She met us with enraged bellows and false charges as she firmly held her ground, protecting her youngster. The mahout wisely kept us at a distance.

One afternoon we approached a *bheel*, or small lake. The muddy shore near the water hole was pocked with rhino prints. The park guide shook his head sadly and pointed at the shrivelled carcass of a large bull rhino. The horn was missing, indicating that this rhino was one of the 15 or 20 animals killed each year by poachers.

Worth a fortune because of the persistent belief in its

Dennis O'Connor divides his time between freelance writing, teaching, cross-country skiing and climbing the occasional mountain (he lives in California's Sierra Nevada). Article © 1978 *Adventure Travel* magazine, reprinted by permission.



Chuck McDougal/Ardea

Both adult and young have skin like armour-plating

aphrodisiac properties, a pound of ground rhino horn has fetched as much as £1000 on the Calcutta black market.

The Indian government has introduced a synthetic 'Rhino Horn Substitute' which is said to have all the effectiveness of the real thing — a boast easily met since Swiss lab tests have shown that rhino horn has no biochemical or hormonal value!

The rampant slaughter of the Indian rhinoceros by poachers and 'sportsmen' at the turn of the century reduced the range of the rhino to small enclaves in southern Nepal and the jungles of Assam. A British census in 1908 found only a dozen of the great one-horned mammals left in the area of Kaziranga. This prompted the colonial government to close the area to shooting. The Indian rhinoceros was perilously close to total extinction and still remains — along with the black, white, Javan and Sumatran rhinos — an endangered species.

Seventy years of vigilance have allowed the rhino population of Kaziranga to grow to an estimated 1000 animals. Yet the grim remains we found near the *bheel* testify to the need for the Forest Service's battle against poachers. At Kaziranga the rhinos are guarded by men patrolling on foot, by elephant back and in vehicles.

Both jeeps and elephants are also available to transport the visitor through the park, and each has its particular advantages. For safe, close-range viewing of animals, there is no substitute for the massive back of a well-trained elephant. Once on top of a pachyderm, you are no longer an intruder in the environment, but you share the elephant's perspective: at once vulnerable and secure.

Most of the park's riding elephants are captured in the surrounding jungle at an early age. The mahout enters into a lifelong partnership with his elephant, training it to overcome its natural fears of both riders and rhinoceroses. When facing up to the charge of a rhino, tuskers are taught to drop to their knees, pull in their vulnerable trunk and bring their tusks into play.

We returned to the compound as night approached, but not before walking with hushed expectancy through the forest. A camouflaged platform had been built in a tall tree; hidden inside, we looked out over a *bheel*, surrounded by dense jungle. Fifty wild elephants appeared, their flapping ears and snaking trunks were briefly mirrored in the still water before the surface was broken by the thirsty herd.

The joyful sound of their trumpeting spread an irrepressible grin across the face of every one of us — a grin that reappears whenever I recall the incredible natural richness of Kaziranga National Park.