



The Rhino Foundation

for nature in NE India

Newsletter No. 5 • June 2003



THE RHINO FOUNDATION

FOR NATURE IN NE INDIA

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Publications of The Rhino Foundation:

- Survey of wildlife in Bherjan, Borajan & Podumoni RFs with a proposal for a wildlife sanctuary.
- Survey of White-winged wood duck and the Bengal florican in Tinsukia district & adjacent areas.
- Dhansiri Tiger Reserve. Revised proposal.
- Birds of Nongkhyllam.
- Survey of Mrs Hume's Pheasant in NE India.
- Newsletters, No.1 (1996), No.2 (1998), No.3 (2001), No.4 (2002).
- Two posters on conservation.

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COVER : Greater Adjutant Stork *Leptoptilos dubius* is an 'endangered' bird with only around a thousand individuals. It breeds only in Brahmaputra valley of Assam and in Cambodia. This rare stork is in danger due to *habitat change, loss of nesting trees and occasional poaching.*

(Photo : ANWARUDDIN CHOUDHURY)

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Feedback back cover

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Assam will inevitably play an important role in this conservation effort, since it apparently contains most of the last surviving Slender-billed vultures in India. To maintain the genetic diversity within the species, critical in the defense against disease agents of the future, no fewer than fifty pairs might be necessary, distributed among a number of institutions to minimize the effects of unpredictable catastrophes.

But the decisions to be made will require dialogue and extended discussions, the dissemination of all available information, and a common commitment to the preservation of our fellow species. Just as reproductive failures of Peregrine Falcons provided an 'early warning' of the effects on humans of persistent organochlorine chemicals in the environment, deaths of vultures from chemicals developed as medicines might also be providing an 'early warning' of hazards as yet □

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Historical records of the Sumatran Rhinoceros in North-East India

KEES ROOKMAAKER*

The Sumatran rhinoceros *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* differs considerably from the other Asian rhinos with its two horns, hairy body and smaller size. It was found from Borneo and Sumatra through the South East Asian mainland and has the western boundary of its distribution in the north east of India. As in the case of the Javan rhinoceros *Rhinoceros sondaicus*, records are few and far between and often vague.

As a species formerly widely distributed in the forests and mountains of Burma (Myanmar), it is to be expected that some lived in or wandered to the hilly regions on the border between Burma and India. This was in fact the case and there are reports all along this line from Chittagong in the south, through Mizoram, possibly Manipur and Nagaland, to Tirap in the north. The northernmost records are not very clear and no specimens have been obtained there. Prince Henri de Orléans (1898) saw tracks of a rhinoceros at Nam Tsai [in Lohit district, Arunachal Pradesh]. Rhinos were still reported on the Dihing river in the 1950's and referred to *D. sumatrensis* by Shebbeare (1953).

All old reports from Manipur seem to refer to one-horned specimens. There were rhinos in Mizoram, but as there are no records of any caught or shot there, it is a guess which kind (or kinds) lived in this hilly region. Milroy (1932) suggested that the animals moved to higher mountains during the flood of July 1929 and never returned. All definite records from Chittagong [Bangladesh] refer to the Sumatran rhinoceros. The type of *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis lasiotis*, described soon after the animal arrived in London Zoo in February 1872, was caught in 1867 on the Sungoo or Sangu river near Chittagong (Hood 1869). In February 1876, a male two-horned rhinoceros was killed 20 miles south of Comillah [now in Bangladesh] (Manson 1876) and the head was preserved in the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of London until its destruction during the second world war. It was thought that the animal had strayed down from the hilly regions of Tripura, because there were no forest left in the place where it was shot. The Sumatran rhinoceros was still seen further westwards, always in the hills and mountains, probably never venturing into the wider valleys. In Meghalaya, rhinoceroses were rare, but whenever they are recorded with some certainty, it is the double-horned species which is identified. The only places ever mentioned were the Cossyah [Khasi] Hills (Anderson 1872) and the Garo Hills (Pollok 1879). The westernmost records come from the northern part of Bengal, where both *R. unicornis* and *R. sondaicus* were known. According to Inglis *et al.* (1919), a Settlement Report by Sunder mentioned that a rhino

Rhinos were still reported on the Dihing river in the 1950's and referred to *D. sumatrensis* by Shebbeare (1953). Sclater (1875) informed the public that the animal was shot in March 1875 . . . on the Sankos river, some 40 miles north of Dhuburi.

mentioned that a rhino was shot in Dalgaon forest, and although these authors seem to refer the animal to *D. sumatrensis*, they do not give any reason why they do this. The same authors state that a two-horned rhinoceros was shot in 1864 on the Sankos river. Another specimen has been well documented through the exhibition of the upper horn by P. L. Sclater in a meeting of the Zoological Society of London. Sclater (1875) informed the public that the animal was shot in March 1875 by Lieut. -Col. C. Napier Sturt [*sic*] in the company of Mr. Archibald Campbell and Mr. Williamson on the Sankos river, some 40 miles north of Dhuburi [Dhubri in Assam]. This certainly is the most western locality for *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* and may be a stray animal rather than a survivor of a local population.



NE India and adjacent areas showing places mentioned in the text

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From the diary of a forest officer

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It was in November 1981 while I was then Divisional Forest Officer, Mehao wildlife sanctuary division at Roing. One day I received a wireless message from my Chief Wildlife Warden that the Deputy Commissioner, Lohit district at Tezu had informed him about panic created by a wild tusker in a village in Namsai subdivision. Even the villagers could not move out of their houses. I was instructed to visit the place and if required even to eliminate the animal.