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Rabbit among the ferns.

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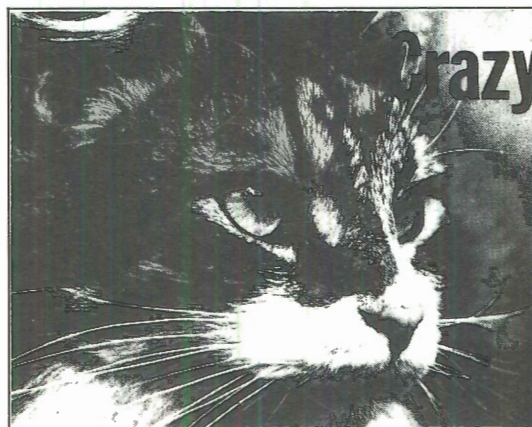
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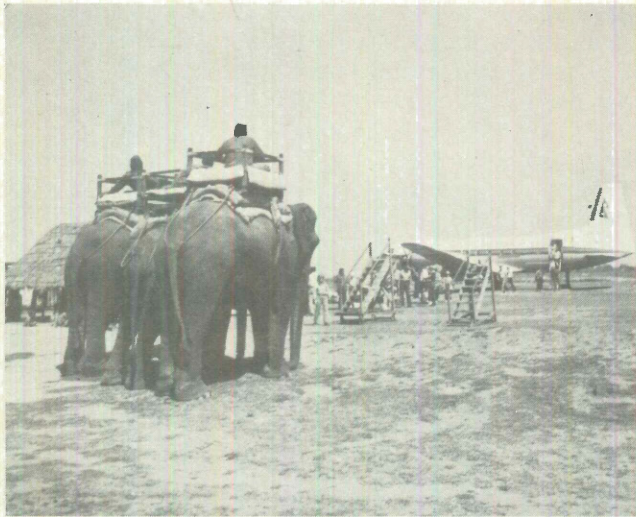
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# Nepal's Royal Enclosure

Text and pictures by Jane Taylor

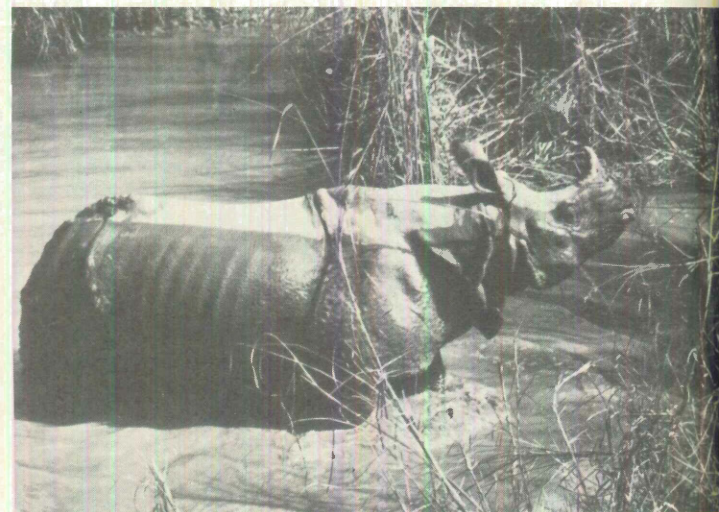
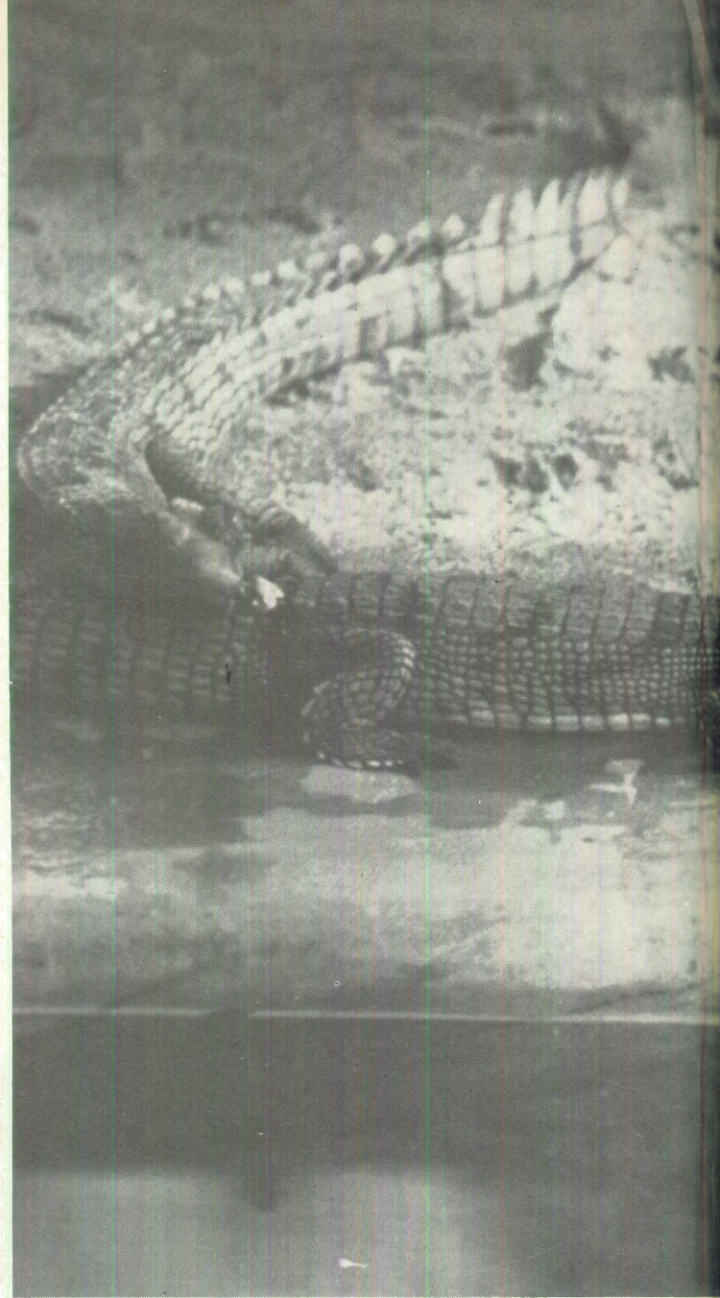
A wildlife park,  
established by the  
King, for Asia's most  
majestic animals

*Elephants greet arrivals at Meghauli airstrip*



*Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge, where the author stayed*

20



*The great Indian one-horned rhinoceros: world population, 1000*



**I**F NEPAL SEEMS to you synonymous with high mountain peaks, and its wildlife dominated by the elusive Yeti, you should fly, as I did, southwards from Katmandu to Meghauli airstrip, a mere 465 feet above sea level. Here in the *terai*, a remote well-watered area of tall elephant grass and dense forest, lies the Royal Chitwan National Park, one of the richest wildlife areas in the whole of Asia.

There is something very appealing about being met at a grass airstrip by a cavalcade of elephants. What better introduction to a wildlife reserve than a two-hour safari on elephant-back, first wading through the Rapti River, then beating through the elephant-high grass and riverine forest in search of animals? We finally arrived at Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge in time for tea and biscuits.

Scientific conservation projects at Chitwan have helped to save — or are in the process of saving — three major species of animal: the Bengal tiger, the great Indian rhinoceros and the gharial, now the world's rarest

*Conservation in action — young gharials being reared in pens. With their elongated snouts, these crocodilians look rather like a group of recumbent clarinetists*

crocodile. Side by side with this work, and indeed pre-dating it, is Tiger Tops, whose director of operations and chief naturalist, Dr Chuck McDougal, is one of the authorities on Indian tigers. He and his colleagues run a very efficient blend of tourism and education in conservation; and a high proportion of the revenue from tourism is channelled directly into conservation projects.

Elephant safaris are no new thing here, though their purpose has completely changed. From 1846 to 1962, the area was used as a hunting ground. Then, the late King Mahendra declared it a wildlife sanctuary. Previously 'ring hunts' had been organised every few years, and hundreds of elephants were used to track and encircle tigers and rhinos. Appalling as the slaughter was, the long intervals between hunts — coupled with the fact that the habitat remained untouched — allowed the animals to

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recover their numbers. But all of this was to change.

During the 1950s, a programme for the eradication of malaria in the lowland areas of Nepal was followed by the resettlement of large numbers of desperately poor hill people. Huge tracts of jungle and grassland were cleared for agriculture, and poaching in the remaining areas of the park became an increasing problem. Especially vulnerable were the rhinos whose horn, with its reputed aphrodisiac qualities, realised vast sums per ounce. By the 1960s the rhino population had dropped from about 800 to less than 200, and the tigers were also drastically reduced.

Not until ten years after Chitwan Valley had been declared a wildlife sanctuary was it established by the present King Birendra as the Royal Chitwan National Park. With the support of His Majesty's Government, conservation projects were set up, largely financed by the World Wildlife Fund, the Fauna Preservation Society and the United Nations. The primary purpose at the time was to save the great Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) from extinction. There are now over 300 in the park, out of a total world population of only 1000.

*Rhinoceros unicornis* is a magnificent anachronism. It appears to have taken a wrong turning in some prehistoric age and turned up, bewildered, in the twentieth century. As we approached on our elephants through the long grass, several rhinos emerged from the water in full armour-plating and peered myopically at us from behind their abbreviated unicorn's horn. One or two made a quick, ungainly get-away, but most stood still or shuffled about uneasily, always keeping us in their hazy view, before making a dignified exit in their own time.

Apart from the rhinos, it is for tigers that Chitwan is most renowned. They are shy, elusive creatures, usually seen – if at all – by night. Fifty years ago there were about 40,000 tigers in the Indian sub-continent – now there are only 2,000, of which 40 are in Chitwan. This is about as many as the park can hold, but the protected environment it offers seems to act as an incubator from which near-adult offspring go out to populate other areas where the reproduction rate is not so high.

Because of the tiger's elusiveness, not all visitors to Tiger Tops see one – but I was lucky. One evening a boy, posted at the hide, saw a tiger approach and ran to tell us. We went in silent single file along the forest track that led to the hide. Our guardian naturalist switched on a powerful torch, and we saw on the other side of a gully a great tiger lying beside the dead bait. He remained quite still for a moment, then tried to pull the bait into the cover of bushes – but it was securely staked. He stayed for a while, licking the bait; then, clearly troubled by the light, backed out of sight. The light was switched off and we left – we were told that he soon came back.

Relatively little is known about the social behaviour of tigers and the Smithsonian Tiger Ecology Project is currently working with Dr McDougal to gather information, using radio telemetry. Tigers are shot with a tranquillizing dart and fitted with a collar containing a small radio transmitter. Even this does not make tracking them easy but gradually more is being learned about their social organisation.

The birds were a constant delight, from the ubiquitous rose-ringed parakeets, red jungle fowl, cattle egrets, dark



*The elephant calf tries to suckle its mother's knee*

kites and red-whiskered bulbuls to brilliant blue Indian rollers, purple sunbirds, black-headed orioles, green bee-eaters and scarlet minivets. Peacocks strutted about in considerable numbers, calling to each other with raucous tin-trumpet cries. Occasionally they launched themselves into the air, seemingly against all the laws of aerodynamics. Down by the rivers there were abundant ruddy shelduck and lapwings, several varieties of herons, storks and kingfishers, and a wide range of other water birds.

One day I saw five fully-grown gharials basking by the river as we floated past in a canoe – with their elongated bell-shaped snouts, they looked like monstrous recumbent clarinetists. It is these crocodiles that are at present the subject of particularly energetic conservation measures, sponsored by Frankfurt Zoological Society and the World Wildlife Fund. Once gharials abounded along the banks of almost every river of the Indian sub-continent. Now man, jackals and the monitor lizard, in their quest for the eggs, have combined to reduce the world population to a mere 150 in the wild.

Two nature reserves – one in India, the other Chitwan – have started programmes of collecting eggs from the widely scattered holes in which they have been laid, and reburying them in carefully guarded areas for six weeks until they hatch. The tiny gharials are then brought to the farm and put in large wire cages, each with a deep pool surrounded with sand. At Chitwan alone, 251 gharials have been raised in the two years in this way.

This is so new an exercise that nobody knows when is the best time to release them into the wild. They have been supplied with live fish in their pools so that they should not miss the normal excitement of the chase for food – but at what age are they big enough to fend for themselves? It has been decided to release some of the first hatching in 1981 when they will be three years old, and see how they survive.

For me, the stars of Chitwan are the elephants. They are no longer native to Nepal but are bought by Tiger Tops from Assam, and make the long journey by foot. Daily they carry human beings – many of whom they must regard with deep dismay – through the forests and grassland, as silent on their feet as cats. At a word from their drivers they stand stock still – even in the face of a

threatening rhino – or move forward or uproot a young tree. Each elephant has a driver and a mahout to look after it, and also a personal manservant whose main task seems to be to make neat bundles of grass enclosing a mixture of rice and molasses – a kind of elephantine packed lunch.

We were taken to the elephant camp early one morning and told how the elephants are cared for. I wondered how the lone male was kept in check with all those cows around him, but it was explained that elephants rarely breed in captivity. In any case, it is against Tiger Tops' policy to allow them to do so, since a calf suckles for about two years and the cow would be unable to work for too long a period.

I spent the following night in another part of the reserve; when I returned the next morning I was met by one of the naturalists who, with a slightly red face, confessed that one of the elephant cows, Durga Kali, had given birth to a bull calf at 1 am. Not one of all those resident zoologists, nor any of the Nepalese drivers and mahouts, had had any idea that she was pregnant! They had thought she was rather broad in the beam and her mammary glands larger than those of the other cows – but had attributed that to individual characteristics.

Despite the red faces, the main response was one of sheer delight. Durga Kali's man-servant made packed lunches in almost industrial quantities which the proud mum devoured as fast as they were thrown to her. Her driver and mahout acted as 'aunties' to the newborn in an attempt to deflect him from his determined attempts to suckle his mother's knees. Finally, after several hours, the correct source of supply was located, and mother and son were removed to an isolation area and provided with every luxury. It was very pleasing to see nature managing to defeat the system. W

## CENTRE PAGES

# Tiger, Tiger...

**The grace, strength and superb colouring of the tiger – among the largest of the big cats – make it one of the handsomest animals in the world.**

**Unlike most members of the cat family, the tiger is a poor climber. But it is a powerful swimmer. It cannot stand intense heat, and in very hot weather will take to the swamps or shallow water to keep cool. In times of flood it preys on turtles and on fish, although its normal diet is game.**

**A large male can be more than nine feet long, including the tail, and stand three feet high at the shoulder. The female is slightly smaller, and it is only when she is in season that she and the male stay together.**

**The first litter is born when the tigress is about three years old, and the cubs remain with her until they are two and can hunt for themselves. They are fully grown at the age of three – by which time their mother will bear another litter.**

Photograph: Christian Zuber/Bruce Coleman



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