



**THE PINKHEADED DUCK**

*(For reference see Page No. 71)*

# CHEETAL



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## Jaldapara on a Winter's Morning

BY A. B. HAWLEY

Until that cold winter's morning in the Dooars earlier this year I had only visited one Sanctuary in India, that near Hazaribagh in Bihar, which gave me my first introduction to India's Wild Life. There I had succeeded only in obtaining fleeting but unforgettable glimpses of the magnificent sambhar and the delicate barking deer. It was in October, and one was lucky to see a tiger or a panther then.

But Jaldapara held much promise. My knowledge of the Sanctuary was limited to the films and slides of some of those who had visited Jaldapara and to the short description in E.P. Gee's "The Wild Life of India", in which he says it has about 40 to 60 rhino (1964): and was "created in the early thirties mainly due to the efforts of E.O. Shebbeare who has played a big part in the preservation of the Indian rhino".

We had arrived by Land Rover from Toorsa Tea Estate bordering Bhutan at 4.30 a.m., after an exceedingly rough ride along a road which should surely be repaired to encourage those who wish to visit the Sanctuary in a car. We were waiting for an army officer who had also arranged to come along that morning. A few minutes after our arrival we heard a couple of shots in the vicinity of the Tourist Lodge at Bara Dabri, and on inquiring what was the reason, we were told that a wild bull had been attempting to get in among the forest department's elephants, and these were efforts to get it back before any damage was caused.

We walked over to where we were to climb on to our elephants. All was quiet except for the rustlings of hay and the rumblings of elephants, ghostly forms which we gradually made out more clearly in the full moonlight. There were four elephants at Jaldapara all well trained in their task of taking people round the sanctuary safe from rhino and the hanging lianas of the thick jungle. After much waiting round the dying embers of a fire, a near-by cock crowed as if to summon us to action. Our mahout Kancha came up with his charge Phulmati. The elephant knelt down. After carefully testing the safety of our cameras and binoculars we climbed on, and at a deliberate lumbering pace set off through the semi-darkness.

Jaldapara Wild Life Sanctuary, for those who have not visited it, has an area of 92 square miles, intersected by several branches of the Malangi and Toorsa rivers flowing down

from the hills of Bhutan. Much of the more dense jungle which once covered the area has been cleared by burning to allow more light and to encourage the growth of grass, thus providing food for the wild life of the sanctuary. An arm of the Malangi is the first water to be crossed, a few minutes from Bara Dabri.

The sky is lighter now, but over the low lying land a dense white mist still twists and swirls, hiding all from view. Gradually over our left shoulder dawn begins to infuse the eastern skies with colour. Ahead of us we can make out an expanse of open ground dotted here and there with trees and covered with thick grass. There is no life yet visible, though we scan the land and sky with our binoculars—not an easy task on a moving elephant. The mahout looks down for signs in the soft mud below and we follow his example. Ahead the Malangi appears in view. A pair of yellow-wattled lapwings raise the alarm giving us our first glimpse of Jaldapara's wild life. As we cross the river a solitary heron gazes intently into the water a hundred yards below us. We are manipulating our cameras when the elephant stops on a sudden, and our eyes follow Kancha's *ankus* pointing to something below us. He whispers "BAGH". I distinctly saw pug marks pressed into the soft earth.

Toward the river course's edge we wind our way through the tall IKRA grass until we reach the steeply eroded bank. The calling of the red jungle fowl greets us as we enter the dark jungle and forge ahead. There appeared to be little light so far and it was not until we reached a forest lane some twenty minutes later that we saw a jackal and felt that the spell was broken. By now we were travelling southwards parallel to the rivers, with tall dense ranks of IKRA grass towering on both sides of the well-maintained forest lanes. Kancha was continually looking down reading the fresh pages of forest life which had been written since the day before. All the while parakeets and mynas called from the tree-tops and white and yellow wagtails bobbed and flew below us.

Suddenly Phulmati stopped, and as Kancha pointed down to the ground at our right we could barely make out the fresh indentation of some large animal that had chosen this spot to leave the track and plunge into the tall elephant grass. We followed. Ten minutes later we came through a small line of trees and found ourselves on the edge of another river course with taller grass thickly covering it. The tracks were still visible and we were so busy looking down that we did not notice anything when Phulmati stopped abruptly. Kancha raised his *ankus* and pointed. Barely ten yards ahead of us stood a bull rhino. The mahout eased the elephant around and we clicked. At last the rhino made off with its comical gait. We followed at a distance until it came to the main Toorsa bank and plunged into the river, obligingly pausing in mid-stream to see if we were following, and giving us a fine view of its

magnificence mirrored in the icy water, with a back-drop of the Bhutan hills and the far off peak of Kanchenjunga already bathed in sunlight.

We turned back and entered the forest at what must have been its densest part. For an hour we laboured on, the elephant resolutely clearing all before her. The light was poor, but our eyes soon became accustomed and before long we were able to surprise a sounder of pig. A lone barking deer did not allow us to get too close but quickly threaded its way through the jungle and made off.

At length we emerged from the thicker forest on a wide cut lane and were presented with a view of a solitary MUKNA feeding on the edge of the tall elephant grass on the other side. The mahout quickly loaded his single barrel 12 bore and proceeded warily. A little further down we ourselves entered the elephant grass, making slow progress through the 20 feet reeds which sprayed us with the stored up rain drops of two days before.

Suddenly we found ourselves descending into the first river course which we had crossed and we were in the open once more. The shrill piping of a redshank betrayed our presence and a brilliant kingfisher flashed past. What had been to us mere forms in the lightening dawn could now be seen in sharp relief against a cloudless sky. A pair of partridge disappeared from under us with a whirr of wings, and then we found ourselves once more among the trees that surround the Tourist Lodge at Bara Dabri.

Jaldapara has much in it to attract people, but the method of booking seems a little haphazard and a telephone connection to the office would surely increase the number of visitors. The sanctuary itself appears well maintained, though accurate reports on poaching are difficult to obtain. I can only hope that the inspecting officers who toured Jaldapara during the two days previous to our visit were as satisfied as we were on a first impression. One hears poaching stories at many game sanctuaries but without a detailed and prolonged study in the area, it is impossible to pass judgements.

It is very gratifying to find a sanctuary of such a small area in which large animals such as rhino and elephant can exist unmolested and in protection. It seems the existence of the Indian one-horned Rhinoceros is ensured; but we should never relax our efforts, not only in conserving the heritage of our wild life but in informing others of our actions, and of the reasons of our actions.



A rhino in the reeds of Jaldapara.



The elephants Phulmanti and Lucky Prasad Jaldapara.