

CHEETA

A Journal of

Wild Life Preservation Society of India



VOL. 7

OCTOBER, 1964

No. 1

THE CHEETAL

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Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant Pashu Vihar

We publish elsewhere the photograph of a red bear pelt which we took ourselves at a taxidermist's workshop. The venerable man confided to us that the red bear in question had been shot by an official in the Bandarpunch basin; Tons or Jemdar, he could not say.

Needless to say, we were aghast, and for a variety of reasons, as we have very pleasant memories of hunting the alps and cliffs of the Tons for 'thar' and 'burrhel' before it was declared a sanctuary; much against our wishes and opinions, for we felt it would be merely a paper sanctuary, like so many others, whereas some sportsmen visiting it regularly and abiding by the rules would perform an automatic Game Warden function.

We decided, therefore, to confirm whether the red bear skin had, indeed, been obtained by an official and in the sanctuary. We wrote to our friend, the shikari, below the Tons-Jemdar confluence, and now have his assurance that the red bear was shot by someone who ought to have known better. Such hateful cynicism on the part of authority who should know better makes us justly indignant.

Death of a Rhino

Normally we are not prone to hysterical excitement like Kensington Landladies about stray instances of a cruelty to cats or minor injustices. Organised cruelty and grave and sustained injustice are far too rampant in the world and more so in India, for lesser evils to warrant such excitement. But in the case of the Rhino that strayed from Kaziranga and eventually died we see the workings of several threads of the kind of web of deceit and inefficiency that we often criticize and it merits our attention. We publish below extracts from Mr. E.P. Gee's letter to The Statesman to give the background to the affair.

Sir,—I feel compelled to point out some popular misconceptions concerning the rhino which died recently in Assam after several months of wandering. Most of these are based on sentimentality. Your Special Correspondent in The Statesman of June 16-17 is mistaken when he thinks that this rhino was wandering "in search of a sanctuary". Most probably it was doing exactly the opposite and was avoiding sanctuaries and the company of others of its own kind, because it is well known that when a bull rhino becomes aged or enfeebled by injuries it gets attacked and badly gashed (not by the horn but by the tusches in the lower jaw) by younger and more vigorous rhinos. This sort of thing often happens among wild animals and birds. That is why so many old (nearly always bull) rhinos leave their sanctuary and spend their last years on the fringe, often near human habitation.

After hearing and reading a lot about this case, I think it probable that this rhino was not "the young age of 30" but much older. Incidentally rhinos do not live in a "herd", but remain solitary, or else in twos or at the most in threes.

Mr. C. Jung (June 21-22) suggests that this wandering rhino should have been "trapped", and the writer of Calcutta Notebook in your issue of June 22-23 also suggests that the animal should have been "saved" or "rescued". Well, when an aged or enfeebled rhino stays on the fringe of its sanctuary it can fortunately survive for a number of years comparatively unmolested—as did the "boorra goonda" and the "kan katta" at Kaziranga. But when it takes to wandering, as some of them do, there is nothing very much that can be done. It is no use trying to trap and transport an old or injured or enfeebled animal to a zoo. In any case the pit method of capturing cannot be used, as there are no well defined tracks of a wandering rhino like those in a sanctuary.

The ideal thing would be to let it roam in peace and die a natural death, but unfortunately the density of human population and widespread cultivation get the rhino into trouble. If it is known that a wandering rhino is in pain and cannot live long, the most humane thing to do would be to shoot it and put it out of its misery. So it is not fair to blame the Assam Forest Department for not catching or rescuing it. Actually the staff of this Department took a lot of trouble in trying to project it during its wandering and in trying (mistakenly) to drive it into the Manas Sanctuary (where it would have got into trouble from other rhinos).

I have seen the report of the post-mortem examination, and it appears that in one of the two gunshot wounds the bullet entered the cranium and might have affected the brain. This might have been the cause of its having wandered in such an erratic manner, crossing the Brahmaputra, no less than five times—presuming that it was the same rhino whose whereabouts were picked up every now and then. Unfortunately the report does not give the approximate age of the rhino, nor does it state when the gunshot wounds were probably inflicted. Was it wounded before it started wandering, or after? If the animal was shot by poachers in the Orang Reserve, then better protection by the Forest Department is needed there, in which an enlightened public opinion can assist.—Yours, etc. E.P. Gee.

Upper Shillong, June 26.

[*Boorra Goonda (the Old Rascal) was probably the best known rhino. He rarely failed to make an appearance before visitors to the Kaziranga Sanctuary. He lived on the fringe of that sanctuary for about 12 years between 1939 and 1951. Kan katta (the earless) also lived on the outskirts of that sanctuary for two or three years till his death in 1953—Ed. S.]

It is putting gloss over inefficiency to not condemn the Forest Department for not having for ready use even one 'Cap-Chur' gun (tranquilliser gun firing drugged-syringe bullets) which alone might have made the Rhino's rescue a feasible and manageable project. We can just imagine what an English or really enterprising young Indian DFO would have done!