

Wildlife

Very few people are aware of the fact that quite close to Guwahati there is a small but attractive wildlife reserve which houses a sizeable rhino population. While talking of rhinos, ie. the great Indian one-horned rhinos (*Rhinoceros Unicornis*), the name of Kaziranga comes to everyone's mind followed by other reserves like Manas etc. But once people come to know of Pabitora, this reserve will come to the forefront as an excellent surviving rhino reserve.

When I reached Pabitora in the morning of January 26 last, my reception committee comprised a huge flock of lesser whistling teals (more than 500).

Such huge flocks are nowadays hardly seen outside protected areas. Besides me, a group of enthusiasts including zoologists like S. Mohammed Ali of the Zoological Survey of India, all of whom participated in the workshop on wildlife

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held in Gauhati University were also there.

Pabitora is a very small reserve covering an area of only 16 square kilometres located in Morigaon subdivision of Nagaon district. It is yet to be declared as a wildlife reserve or sanctuary. In 1971, Pabitora was made into a reserved forest, prior to that it was a grazing reserve. It is still proposed wildlife sanctuary and is situated 52 kilometres to the east of Guwahati. The first 34 kilometres along NH 37 is metalled, the remaining 18 kilometres being of gravel.

The bulk of the reserve consists of tall grassland with swamps here and there in between. Ekra is the main species of grass, other species include *Saccharum* sp., *nal*, *khagon*, *bata* etc. There are some woods too with *koroi*, *ajhar*, *simul*, wild *boroi bogori* (*Zizyphus* sp.), etc trees.

There are about 100-120 rhinos in Pabitora. When we set out on elephant back at mid-day, three rhinos were seen together in a mud wallow. One was an adult female with a juvenile and the third was a sub-adult, perhaps of the same mother. The presence of two elephants with riders disturbed them a bit. They observed us from the wallow for few minutes, then came

out and stood on the edge of the wallow. When the next group of visitors went to the spot after about half an hour the animals were not there.

Pabitora's pride lies in the fact that it has the highest density in the world of these rare rhinos. The density here is 6.3 to 7.5 rhinos per sq. km, whereas in Kaziranga it is only 2.8 per sq. km. Such a high density of an endangered species makes Pabitora an important site for conservation priority.

Another significance of Pabitora rhinos lies in the fact that the average body size of the animals here is more impressive than those of Kaziranga. This phenomenon was first recounted to me by Mr Islam, a retired Chief Conservator of Forests of Assam sometime back. He also told me that the only other area where such "impressive-sized" rhinos are seen is Orang reserve in Darrang district. However, for an authentic conclusion some specimen examination is necessary which has not yet been done.

As the areas of the reserve is very small, rhinos often move out of the protected area and frequent the fields of the neighbouring villages. Some stray upto the vicinity of Greater Guwahati in the fields of Pragjyotishpur district as well as on the char areas of the same district. Pabitora rhinos are frequently seen. One rhino strayed as far west as Goalpara in December January 1984, a distance of more than 200 kms. It travelled via Nalbari, thus covering a distance of about 300 kms before being captured for translocation to Dudhwa national park of Uttar Pradesh.

Besides rhinos about four leopards reportedly occur in the area. Other animals include wild pigs, otters, jackals, various snakes etc. Few barking and hog deer may also occur in the area. Some feral buffaloes from neighbouring villages have also made Pabitora their home.

Among birdlife, blacknecked stork (*tella herang* in local Assamese), grey heron, pond heron, little egret, cattle egret, small blue kingfisher, pied kingfisher, white-breasted kingfisher, large cormorant, little cormorant, lesser whistling teals, darter, Pallas's fishing eagle, grey-headed fishing eagle, brahming kite, parish kite, jungle crow, tree pe, parakeets, green pigeons, doves, redvented bulbul and jungle myna were observed by me during the six hours stay in the lakes. A large

A day in Pabitora



Whistling teals in flight dot the skyline over Pabitora.
Photo: Anwaruddin Choudhury

number of migratory water fowls come for wintering.

There is a Forest Inspection Bungalow (IB) on the banks of Haduk bil, one of the many bills of the reserve. The IB is well furnished and close to it there is a watch tower from where a good portion of the reserve is visible. But a pair of powerful binoculars (12X) are recommended. I could observe four rhinos from the tower.

Though there are no facilities for visitors to travel inside the reserve, two hired elephants which are mainly used for patrolling are used for wildlife viewing for interested visitors. On Haduk bil, boats are also available for interested visitors. About a dozen armed Home Guards patrol the reserve frontiers. There are also about one and half dozen Game

Watchers and Forest Guards keeping vigil on the reserve and its rhinos.

Though the area is not a wildlife sanctuary, yet it is receiving protection as a wildlife area. The staff of the area also appeared to be very sincere and thus the result — no poaching reported over the past three years. The border is contiguous with inhabited villages on almost all sides. Domestic stock from these villages graze regularly inside the reserve. Moreover there is every likelihood of encroachment along the border zone in future.

Without delay the reserve should be declared a wildlife sanctuary/national park. About 10-15 sq. km more from the adjoining plains area should be included, in which case relocation of some families may be required. Moreover the Mayang Hill forest is also not far to the north-west, a corridor linking both the areas will be of much advantage.

to the wildlife of the area. Mayang Hill forests is often visited by wild elephants and tiger from nearby Chandrapur area. Barking deer and wild pigs are also there. As the reserve is a small one, the permanent barrier in the form of a stone wall with rails etc., should be erected in those border areas where there is more possibility of encroachment.

Tourism facilities should be developed to a certain extent. Proximity to Guwahati has made it a great potential area for tourism. This will also take off some pressure from Kaziranga.

But now the question is whether tourism is going to disturb the jungle peace?

It is true that uncontrolled tourism is harmful to wildlife anywhere as a whole. In many big reserves in

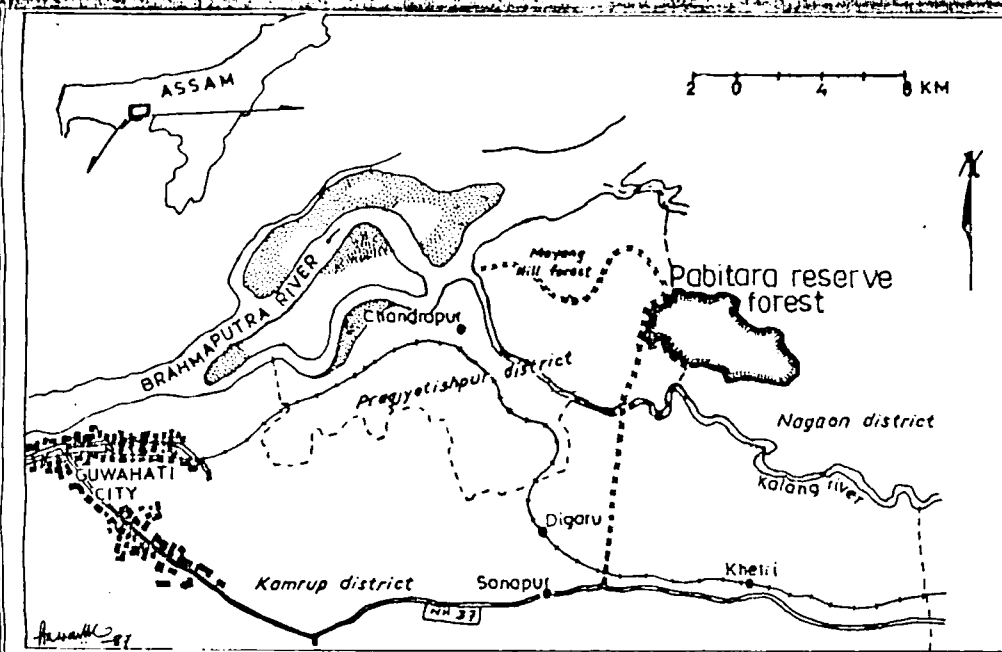
Africa and North America (in other areas too) a large part of the area is maintained as visitor-free zone in the strictest sense. In India too, the core areas of Tiger Reserves are more or less maintained in that line. But in reserves like Kaziranga and Ranthambhor, wildlife is facing hostile visitors in the form of poachers, grazers, fishermen and encroachers. And in small reserves like Pabitora such things are inevitable. But of course, one hundred friendly tourists are much better than a single hostile encroacher or poacher.

It may be mentioned here that in most of the bills which are near the reserve boundary, fishing is extensively carried on by the 'Mahaldars'. This should be discontinued with immediate effect, if necessary the mahaldars should be compensated. Moreover the fishermen sometimes fish in other bills inside the reserve which are not within the purview of their contracts. This also makes way for greater chances of poaching.

One day package tours can be organized successfully from Guwahati (Kaziranga and Manas require at least two days) in tourism as well

as conservation infrastructure, some locals from the neighbouring villages should be absorbed so that their concept on conservation will change. It may be mentioned here that in most of the villages near sanctuaries, the local residents are basically hostile to tourism and conservation as they do not get any direct benefit from conservation. Instead they lose right of free movement inside the forests, right of grazing, fishing etc., and sometimes their crops to marauding animals.

For giving a thrust to tourism the Government of India may consider relaxing of permit conditions for foreign tourists for Guwahati and its nearby areas. And Pabitora could grow to be a major tourist centre very close to Guwahati.



Today's Sentinel

HIGHLIGHTS

Residue: The first prize-winning story in **The Sentinel (Amardeep Memorial)** short story competition, written by Janulla K. Marak. The two other award-winning stories, by Jahnavi Baruah and Reuben Choudhury are to be carried in subsequent weeks.

A day in Pabitora: An outing to this little-known wildlife sanctuary in Nagaon district along with Anwaruddin Choudhury.

The mad and the irrational: M.V. Kamath's weekly exclusive.

Flight into history: Jim Fuller on what went into the epic round-the-world flight by Jeanne Yeager and Dick Rutan in aircraft *Voyager*.

Plus all our other regular columns and features besides the comic strips for your Sunday morning reading.