

fibres and fine grass stems and lined with the latter. It may be pendent in a horizontal fork or just hanging from a few twigs either of bamboo or of some shrub within a few feet of the ground.....Its nest is built either in evergreen forest, mixed bamboo and scrub or in bushes in thin cover." The eggs number 2 or 3 and are white in colour with a few pale reddish blotches confined to the longer end. They measure 0.64 by 0.49 inches.

(To be continued).

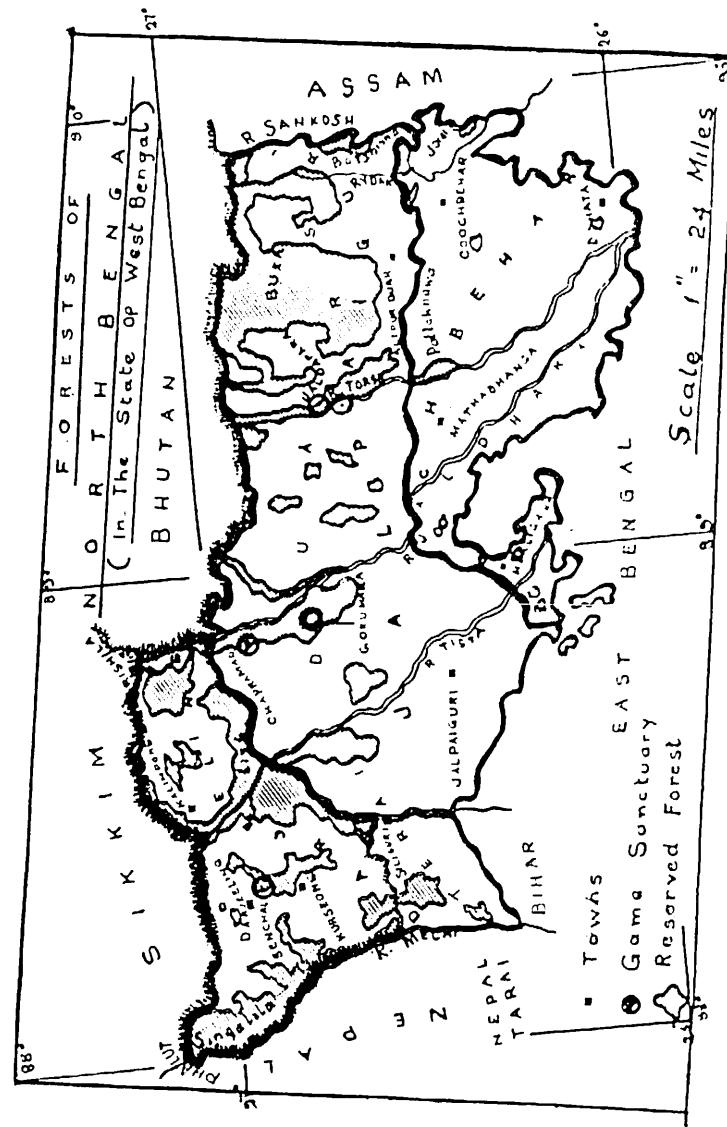
THE VANISHING FAUNA OF NORTH BENGAL

By

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The preservation of Wild Life in India has been engaging the serious attention of Naturalists and the Government. That India was rich in its Wild Life even a few decades ago is well known. With the passing of time, however, conditions have changed considerably, and in consequence 'fauna' is decreasing rapidly. Several species are now either extinct or on the point of extinction and if suitable steps are not taken to create conditions conducive to the preservation and growth of wild life in natural surroundings, many more species will be altogether extinct, and the abundance of Indian Wild Life will be a topic of the past. Almost all books on the subject give lively accounts of wild life in various parts of the country, but there is very little reference to the fauna of North Bengal and few people, therefore, have any idea as to how rich it was and how rapidly it is now being decimated.

The districts of Cooch-Behar, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling at one time abounded in Wild Life. Conditions there were conducive to the preservation of fauna because of the advantageous natural features of the country. This tract of land consists of a portion of the outlying hills of the lower Himalayas and a stretch of territory lying along the base of the



hills known as the 'Terai' on the West of the Teesta River and the 'Duars' on the East. The altitude varies from 200 ft. in Cooch-Behar to about 12,000 ft. in Darjeeling District. Numerous hill streams and rivers intersect the foot-hill regions covered with long belts of evergreen forests. The hill portion is a labyrinth of ridges and narrow valleys—clad in great patches of rocky forests on the crests and green masses of dense mixed forests on the slopes. This area—bounded on the north by Sikkim and Bhutan, on the West by Nepal and on the east by Assam—is what is known as 'North Bengal'. While the Sankosh River separates it from Assam, the Mechi demarcates it from Nepal Terai and in between flow the mighty rivers Teesta, Jaldhaka, Torsa and Rydak. The annual rainfall varies from 80" to 200"....

Owing to the marked variation in the physical and climatic features the forests in North Bengal fall under two distinct categories—plains and hills. The diversity of elevation, climate and vegetation has made the fauna varied and interesting. A reference to the District Gazetteers reveals that as many as 100 species of mammals and over 550 species of birds existed not even a century ago. Darjeeling district alone accounted for nearly one-quarter of the species of birds found in India, Burma and Ceylon. To-day some of those species simply do not exist. Many more are doomed to a similar fate if timely action is not taken for their preservation.

For administrative convenience these forests were divided into five Forest Divisions—Darjeeling, Kurseong, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri and Buxa. After the integration of the Cooch-Behar State into the State of West Bengal on 1st January, 1950, another Forest Division known as Cooch-Behar Division has been carved out of the portions of Jalpaiguri, Buxa and Cooch-Behar forests. It is interesting to note that the first Reserved Forest in Bengal was created in 1865 in the present Darjeeling Forest Division. For conservation of wild life, game sanctuaries were also set up, namely, Jaldapara, Gorumara and Chapramari in the Jalpaiguri district and Senchal in the Darjeeling District. The Senchal Game

Sanctuary was set up in the year 1915 and is the first of its kind in the whole of India. Rights of shooting and fishing in the Reserved Forests of the three North Bengal Districts are leased to three Game Associations, one in Darjeeling and two in Jalpaiguri and Cooch-Behar, and are federated into "The Game Federation of Bengal", the main object of this body being to preserve the existing fauna, in particular game animals, birds and fish of Bengal, and to introduce suitable species into this area. These Associations, besides regulating hunting and fishing, are also to protect and preserve game within their respective areas with the help and guidance of Government Forest Officers. North Bengal can thus boast of having the first Notified Reserved Forests, the first Game Sanctuary and as many as three Game Associations. Yet little could be done during the period that followed for effective preservation of its rich and varied fauna, mainly due to public apathy towards this question.

In the ever-green forests of Terai and Duars large herds of 'Gaur' or Bison could be met with. Even in the year 1922, one bull bison worked its way up to the 'Chowrasta' in Darjeeling town—an elevation of 7100 ft. He was seen peeping through the window of a house in the vicinity. The inmates raised an alarm and the bison ran away killing two persons on the road. He was ultimately shot. The skull and the horns can still be seen in the Darjeeling Natural History Museum. A few Bison now remain in some isolated forest blocks. Wild Buffalos were plentiful in Eastern Duars and Cooch-Behar. The late Maharaja of Cooch-Behar mentions in his book "Big Game Shooting" that he shot as many as 438 buffalos in that area during the period—1871 to 1907. To-day only few can be seen. Both Bison and Buffalos are now strictly preserved. Unless Forest villagers in the vicinity of these preserves can be persuaded to have their domestic cattle inoculated against disease, the ever present risk of the extermination of Bison and Buffalos overnight will always be present. The Great one-horned Rhinoceros was extensively distributed in the riparian jungles of Duars and Cooch-Behar. Indiscriminate poaching almost exterminated the species. Only as a

result of very strict preservation though woefully belated, a small number now survive and can be seen in the Game Sanctuaries of Duars and in the Patlakhowa Forest in Cooch-Behar. The Sanctuaries have proved a failure in harbouring rhino as the practice of annual burning of forests in blocks has been discontinued in these areas. Undesirable species of trees are squeezing the rhino out of the grassy plains in which they thrive. Herds of elephants used to roam about in the Terai and the Duars. None can be seen now in the Terai and few remain in Duars. Occasionally a herd or two descend from the Bhutan hills with the advent of autumn, but soon disappear when the harvesting of the paddy crop is over. It is interesting to note that in Darjeeling district there is one place where elephants are still to be found. 'Rishi La' at an altitude of 10,300 ft. and clothed for miles together with virgin forests has been the favourite haunt of elephants for centuries. There are permanent elephant tracks leading from Rishi La to the plains in the Duars. Tiger Pugs have also been noticed on these tracks at elevations of 6000 ft. to 8000 ft. Presumably the tigers, being very fond of baby elephants, follow the herds along those tracks. Hundreds of 'Chital' or Spotted Deer—the most beautiful of all Deer species grazing in glades or grassy clearings in the Terai and the Duars were a common sight not even two decades ago. A few small herds can now be seen in scattered and isolated areas always on the run for fear of extermination. Sambhur—the largest of all deer—inhabiting the plains and hills up to about 3,500 ft.—could be seen all over the region. Only a small number now survive. Even their horns have gone back owing to indiscriminate slaughter. The Bara-Singha or Swamp Deer is practically extinct. A few are reported to have been seen only in Jaladapara Sanctuary. The Indian Chevrotain or Mouse deer was at one time reported to have been seen, but it is doubtful if any exists to-day. Such is the present day condition of the larger mammals—once plentiful in the plains and foot-hill forests!

The hill forests have suffered much more during the last thirty years or so. The Musk deer and 'Bharal' (Blue Sheep)

which were not uncommon near Phalut (12,000 ft.) no longer exist. The Clouded Leopard with its beautiful tortoise-shell markings, the Marbled Cat and the Golden Cat are rarely to be seen. The same is the case with the Pangolin—undoubtedly one of the rarest and most curious of animals. The Serow and the Goral—two of the three existing Goat-Antelope species in India—are rapidly disappearing as their rocky fastnesses are being steadily disturbed. The Pigmy Hog is no more to be met with. Of the Game Birds, the beautiful Monal or Impeyan Pheasant and the Tragopan or Crimson Horned-Pheasant—once plentiful in Singalila ridge in Darjeeling at altitudes between 10,000 ft. and 12,000 ft.—are practically non-existent.

The last fifty years have wrought considerable changes in the number and distribution of animals and birds in North Bengal. Extension of cultivation and consequent reduction in the area under Forest, and the building of a good number of motorable roads have no doubt disturbed Wild Life. But these alone are not responsible for the alarming rate of the disappearance of fauna. A critical examination of the causes leading to this state of affairs by any keen Naturalist points to other factors also. Gun licenses have been issued in ever increasing numbers to cultivators near Reserved Forests ostensibly for the protection of their crops. Most of them have been misused and applied ruthlessly against deer and game birds. Tea-garden labourers in their hundreds ransack the forests—as a regular week-end pastime—and kill countless numbers of deer and pigs for meat. Young boys roam around with their catapults and threaten the very existence of birds of all descriptions. Budding 'Shikaris' armed with modern weapons, spot lights and that wonderful legacy of the 'last Great War'—the Jeep—regularly poach, killing whatever happens to come across their way and perhaps wounding many more—sometimes eluding the Keepers of the Forests and not infrequently taking advantage of their indifference—just for the thrill of slaughtering. The ignorance of the great majority of our people and their apathy in this regard have encouraged the 'Crop Brigades', 'Tea Brigades' and the 'Jeep Brigades'

to continue their depredations with unabated zeal. Though some active members of the Game Associations and some conscientious officers tried to put a stop to the depredations of the various Brigades, their efforts proved abortive due primarily to the lack of understanding and proper co-ordination between the Associations and the Forest Officials. Attempts were made to preserve wild life in certain Sanctuaries. But the Sanctuaries were not maintained on proper scientific lines and the conditions necessary for the conservation and growth of particularly the rarer species did not exist there. The result was not at all conducive to the preservation of Wild Life. All these factors have contributed to the deteriorating state of Wild Life in North Bengal.

How long can we afford to overlook this state of affairs? Will not something be done to preserve this rich and varied fauna of North Bengal? We are no doubt late—but not too late yet to take active steps for the conservation of the species that still survive. It is most gratifying to note that the Government of India have been pleased to constitute and appoint a Central Board for Wild Life. Let a State Board be formed also and let public interest be roused in this regard. The Governmental agency without active public co-operation and help is not likely to be effective. Likewise, Game Associations alone cannot do much either. Past experiences clearly prove that. There should be perfect understanding and co-ordination between the representative Associations and the Governmental agency and both must act in co-operation with the people. Then and then only will it be possible to save the vanishing fauna of North Bengal.

AWARENESS IN WILDFOWL

By

VICTOR ROSNER

It happened in Kompolla forest. A friend and I were watching a team of Whistling Teal circling a jheel. Six of the team broke away to come down on the branches of a dead tree standing in the shallows. The rest of the flight, near on