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Memoirs of a Forest Officer

by

JOHN ROWNTREE

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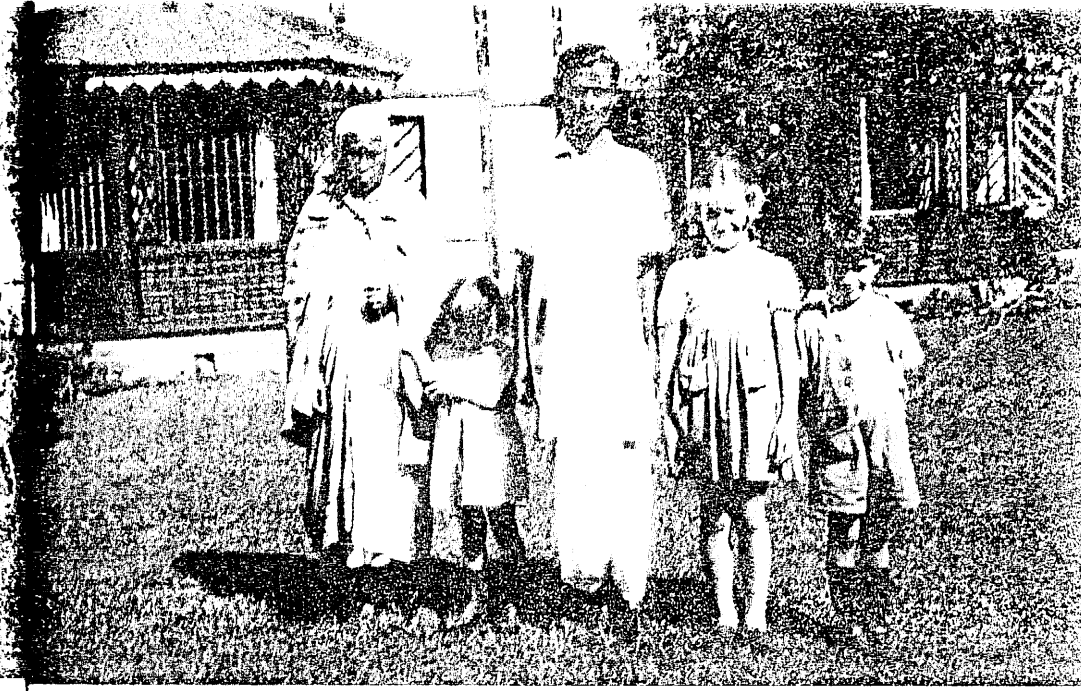
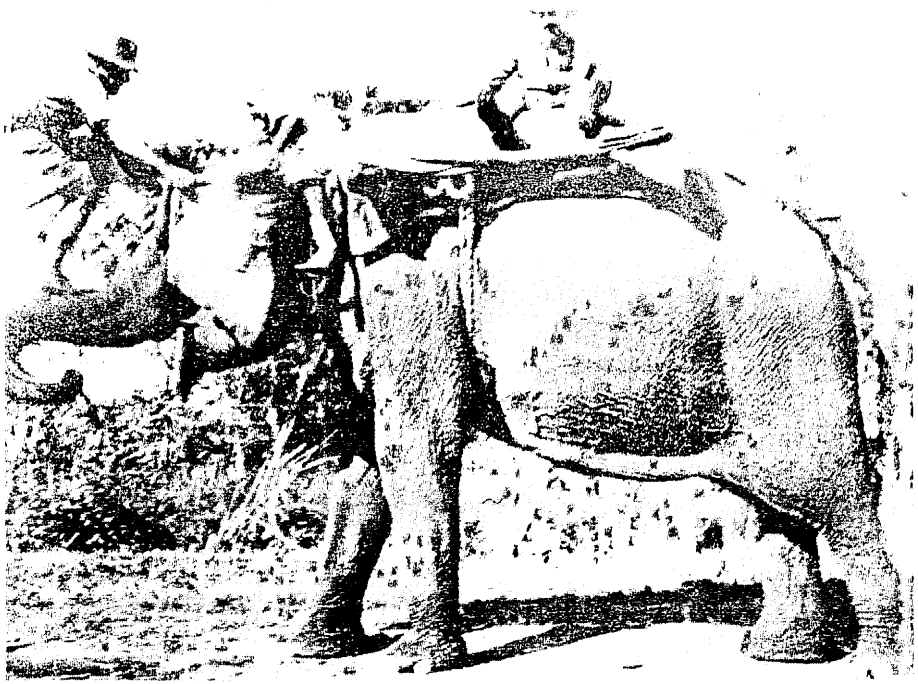
13 *Rhino*



17 *Family with Cook and Ayah*

14 *How one got on board*



15 *Baby elephant born in Kulsi camp*

16 *Sal forest*

wonders with the help of iodine; potassium permanganate, usually known as pinky pani, or pink water; olive oil, and even clay to plug the wounds. Our departmental elephants suffered chiefly from saddle galls caused by the pads on which we sat, and sometimes these developed into large abscesses. It always amazed me that the elephants allowed the doctor babu to incise these abscesses with his knife and syringe them out, and that he escaped the attention of their waving trunks.

The captured elephants were taken from Assam to the great annual elephant fairs in central India where they were sold, and I fear that, in spite of our previous care, some of them were neglected and did not live very long in the dry heat to which they were unaccustomed.

Elephant catching was, however, such an established business, and the elephants, such an important source of revenue, provided a living for so many people, and were in such great demand at that time, that to refuse to supply them would have been politically impossible, even had the powers-that-be wished to do so. It would have been equivalent to closing down the motor car industry in this country, and all we could do was to ensure that the catching and training was done humanely and to hope that our charges would enjoy as good a life as possible afterwards.

Unfortunately elephants are such avid feeders that they need large tracts of virgin jungle in which to live, and such tracts are becoming fewer and further apart every year. It is the opening up of the jungle for cultivation which is endangering the future of elephants and other wild animals more than anything else, and this is something which cannot be avoided. Fortunately, forestry in India is a paying concern and is smiled on by the local governments. There is a reasonable hope that the majority of the forest reserves, constituted as such in the time of the Raj, will continue to be preserved. When I left Assam in 1947 it contained 6,690 square miles of reserved forest, or 9.7 per cent of the total area; and 14.507 square miles of unreserved forest. No doubt much of the latter has since been disforested but, as far as I know, most of the reserves are still intact.

The forest reserves were, however, created to preserve the timber resources of the country and are not necessarily ideal habitats for wild animals, many of which prefer to live in the more open, sparsely tree-covered savanna areas. As a result, by 1947, 459 square miles of game sanctuaries had been established in the province, mostly riverside areas, subject to flooding and therefore not in such demand for cultivation. However, owing to the ever-increasing land shortage, there was a growing demand by cultivators for even these areas, and whether they can be preserved as game sanctuaries

remains to be seen — fortunately there appears to be a good chance that they can.

In 1966 I received a heartening report from Mr. P. Barua, then chief conservator of forests in Assam, regarding the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary in the Sibsagar district, and the largest game reserve in the province. From this report it appeared that the area of the Assam game sanctuaries had actually risen from 458 square miles in 1947 to 580 square miles at that time. The annual number of visitors to the Kaziranga Sanctuary had increased from 192 to 3,723 within twenty years, the majority being Indians, with large contingents from the USA and Europe. The estimated number of rhino in Assam was 486, 400 of which were thought to be in Kaziranga where 366 were actually counted in 1965.

The estimate of rhino numbers in the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary was based on a detailed survey carried out by Mr. J. Julian Spillett, an American ecologist from the Johns Hopkins Institute, and the local divisional forest officer, Mr. H. K. Nath, on what are described as internationally approved lines. The high grass precluded the use of aeroplanes and an aerial count and, instead, the 166 square miles were divided into eight blocks, each block being again subdivided into sub-compartments of approximately five square miles, artificial boundary lines being cut through the grass where necessary. Eighteen parties, supplied with elephants, carried out the census over a period of two days, recording species and, as far as possible, the sex and approximate age of all the animals seen.

Apart from the rhino, there was a count of 349 elephants, 471 buffalo and over 1,600 deer, mostly hog deer but including a fair number of swamp deer and rather fewer sambar. The estimated total number of deer was 4,000 to 5,000. There were a few barking deer, wild pig were common and a number of otters were seen. Bison, tiger, bear and leopard were scarce, surprisingly so in the case of the carnivores, with so much game about. Sex and age were difficult to determine with some species but, in general, the distribution appeared to indicate a healthy state of affairs.

Elephant numbers were unexpectedly large, but burning of *jums* was going on in the nearby Mikir Hills at the time, and they may have sought refuge in the sanctuary as a result.

When I last visited Kaziranga in 1947, the only available accommodation was a two-roomed bungalow, furnished, but without services of any kind. From the nearest railway station a dirt track connected the sanctuary with the outside world. Today one can fly to Jorhat and from there travel the sixty miles to Kaziranga, over the well-surfaced National Highway in a comfortable bus. Arrived at the sanctuary, the visitor is accommodated in a modern, well-

equipped tourist lodge administered by the Assam Tourist Department. The fans may not always work but I am told by a recent visitor that the food is good. A staff of over one hundred now guards the sanctuary and looks after the tourists, and thirteen elephants are provided for their use. I hope they don't all sit down together.

I am also glad to hear that a suggestion made by me when I was conservator, that the sanctuary should be used for scientific and educational purposes, has borne fruit. When the British left India most of us were afraid the game sanctuaries would soon be disforested but, I am glad to say, we were wrong. Kaziranga has proved to be Assam's biggest tourist attraction and its value as such is appreciated by the Assamese who, in these days of improved communications, are able to benefit from the tourists in a way that we never could.

I am told that the demand for land inside the sanctuary has tailed off, possibly because, since partition, no more immigrants have come in from Bengal, where land hunger is greater than among the Assamese. There is, however, an increased demand for grazing within the sanctuary. Within limits this might be a harmless activity, except that a grazier is always a potential poacher. There is also the risk of infection, which cannot be taken lightly.

Most of the graziers in Assam are Nepalies whose large herds of buffalo graze the grassland along the banks of the Brahmaputra. The buffalo milk is mostly made into ghee, or clarified butter, stored in old kerosene tins and sold in the towns. The domestic, but not so tame, buffalo cows frequently mate with wild bulls which visit them as they graze. This injects virile new blood into the herd, but the graziers' buffaloes are subject to rinderpest epidemics and the wild animals may become infected. The Government had a scheme for vaccinating the domestic herds and, if this were followed rigorously, perhaps the least-frequented parts of the sanctuary might be opened to grazing without any regrettable consequences.

Floods are an uncontrollable annual occurrence which cause some loss of animal life, but on the whole, probably do more good than harm by washing the *bheels* clear of the ever-persistent water hyacinth which would otherwise choke them up completely. Floods do, however, encourage animals to leave the sanctuary, which puts them in great danger from poachers. A proposed scheme to reserve a corridor between the sanctuary and the Mikir Hills, as an escape route, is worthy of further consideration.

The annual fires that sweep through the tinder dry grass during the hot weather preceding the rains are also unavoidable. Unless the graziers set fire to their grazing grounds, it is difficult for their animals to find succulent

young grass, but these fires inevitably spread to the sanctuary. Fortunately, the sanctuary is criss-crossed by numerous *bheels* and swamps, and such fires are localised. Slow-moving reptiles such as the pythons may be destroyed but most of the animals escape the flames. The grazing of the wild herbivores is also improved and visitors to the sanctuary are able to get a better view of its inmates.

Poaching will continue to be a problem and the rhino will always be in danger as long as men worship at the shrine of Aphrodite Pandemos. In 1965, in spite of stringent precautions, eighteen rhino were known to have been killed by poachers, but this was a particularly bad year, only two having perished in 1966. Since then I have not heard how the rhino have fared but, all in all, the general picture appears to be encouraging and the future of wild life conservation in Assam seems to be reasonably well assured.

The one-horned Indian rhino is less aggressive than his African cousin but can, nevertheless, be a dangerous customer if annoyed. He is one of the few animals, apart from dogs and mice, that the Indian elephant really fears, and he can inflict appalling wounds to an elephant's undercarriage with his sharp tushes. At the same time, the Indian rhino is a remarkably easy animal to domesticate and in ancient times was used by the Assamese to draw their ploughs. While I was in Assam we caught three rhino in pits for the Regents Park Zoo. Unfortunately two died and, when one considers the hardship that wild animals inevitably suffer when in transit, it seems doubtful whether such transactions are justified. What was interesting was the rapidity with which these rhino lost their fear of man. Within a fortnight they became quite tame and I was able to enter the small stockade in which one of them was confined and handle the horny monster. Admittedly, these were young animals but were well past the calf stage being, in fact, the size of large bullocks. *Rhinoceros unicornis* is thick skinned, but his low IQ seems to have made him more rather than less tractable.

It would have seemed ridiculous at that time to suggest that tigers could ever become extinct, but in 1973 there were estimated to be only 2,000 tigers left in India, compared to 40,000 in 1930.

The concentration of species in the game reserves, as the surrounding jungle is opened up for cultivation, is likely to pose another problem, that of over-population, as it has in Africa.

This has already involved the culling of some animals, a necessary but unpleasant operation to the conservationist, and one which can scarcely be avoided in India. But, because elephants exist in communities and the members of a herd are interdependent on one another, the thinning out of each separate herd would so disrupt the elephant society as to lead to the

eventual extinction of all the herds. This, at least, is the view of people who have studied the problem, and it is now felt that entire, selected herds may have to be destroyed, leaving the others intact — a grim task for those who have to carry it out.

In the meantime, I must congratulate the Government of Assam on its good sense in preserving this unique heritage, and long may it continue to do so.

Leopards used to be as numerous as tigers though one seldom saw them, but once I was uncomfortably close to one of these spotted cats. I was living under canvas at the time in a clearing in the sal forest and my dog, as usual, slept under the camp bed. One night his whining woke me up but, although I listened carefully, I could hear nothing, and crossly told him to shut up and let me go to sleep again. There was silence for some time and I was just dropping off when I heard a rustling under my bed — the dog beat a hurried retreat and started to growl angrily. My electric torch was under the pillow and, by its light, a spotted paw was revealed groping under the wall of the tent a few inches away. When I jumped out of bed, the leopard made off before I had time to snatch up a gun and give chase. The faithful hound apologised for the disturbance and I, for my part, felt rather mean for having been so mistrustful.

This was during the hot weather, often a time of violent winds and sudden storms. The next day I returned to camp in the afternoon to find a large tree lying across my tent. It is said that lightning never strikes twice in the same place but I felt that somehow I wasn't really welcome. I decided a nod was as good as a wink and moved to another site.

In some ways life in Nowgong was tough and unpleasant but it had many compensations and I shall never regret my three years in the district. My interest in wild life, which began with a rifle in my hands and ended with a camera, took me to many a place which I should never have visited in the course of duty. The same interest encouraged the forging of closer links with the jungle folk than would otherwise have been the case, and I am sure this is an essential part of a forester's training. I am also convinced that people who start out to shoot game usually end by becoming the most ardent conservationists. That was certainly so in my case.

It was on my last visit to Shillong from Nowgong that I met Joy Wingate, who became my wife. The following cold weather, she visited me with her sister and brother-in-law, Amy and Benjie White, with whom she was staying. We spent some time in camp where she decided she could stand the jungle life, as well as me, and we became engaged. We were to be married at home and sailed on the same ship, something considered rather daring in

those days. This was a rather slow B & I steamer that called at Madras for cargo, where we had our first flight in a light plane which was taking people for trips. From Columbo we paid a visit to Kandy by train, and at Suez drove through the night to Cairo to see the pyramids and rejoin the ship at Port Said. The trip to the pyramids was on horseback, and not without incident. My wife-to-be's pony took the bit between its yellow teeth and galloped home at full speed disappearing in a cloud of dust over the horizon. Much to my relief I soon found Joy again, quite unharmed. Duly wed, we returned at the end of my leave to Kamrop District, where we were stationed at Gauhati.