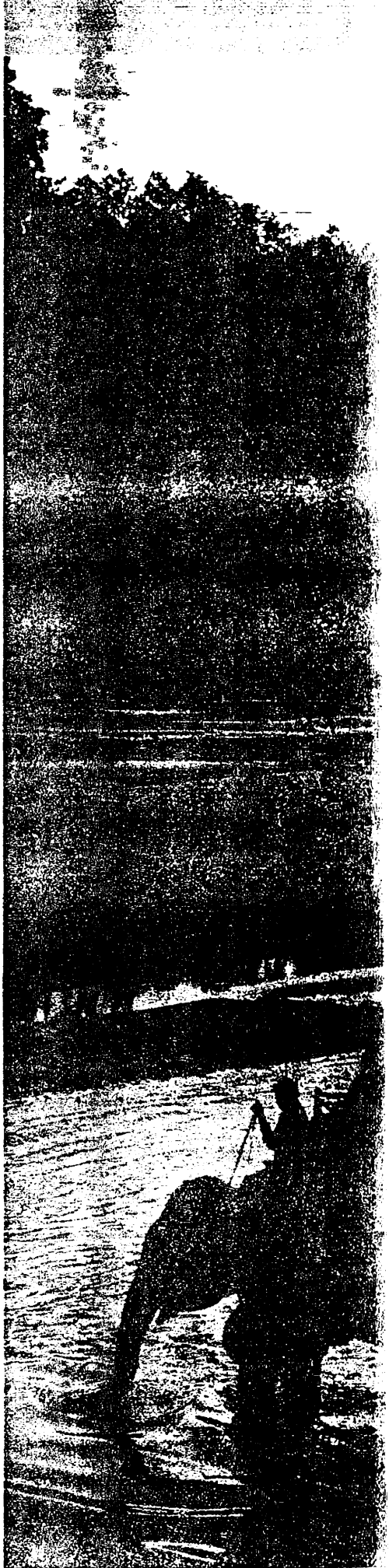
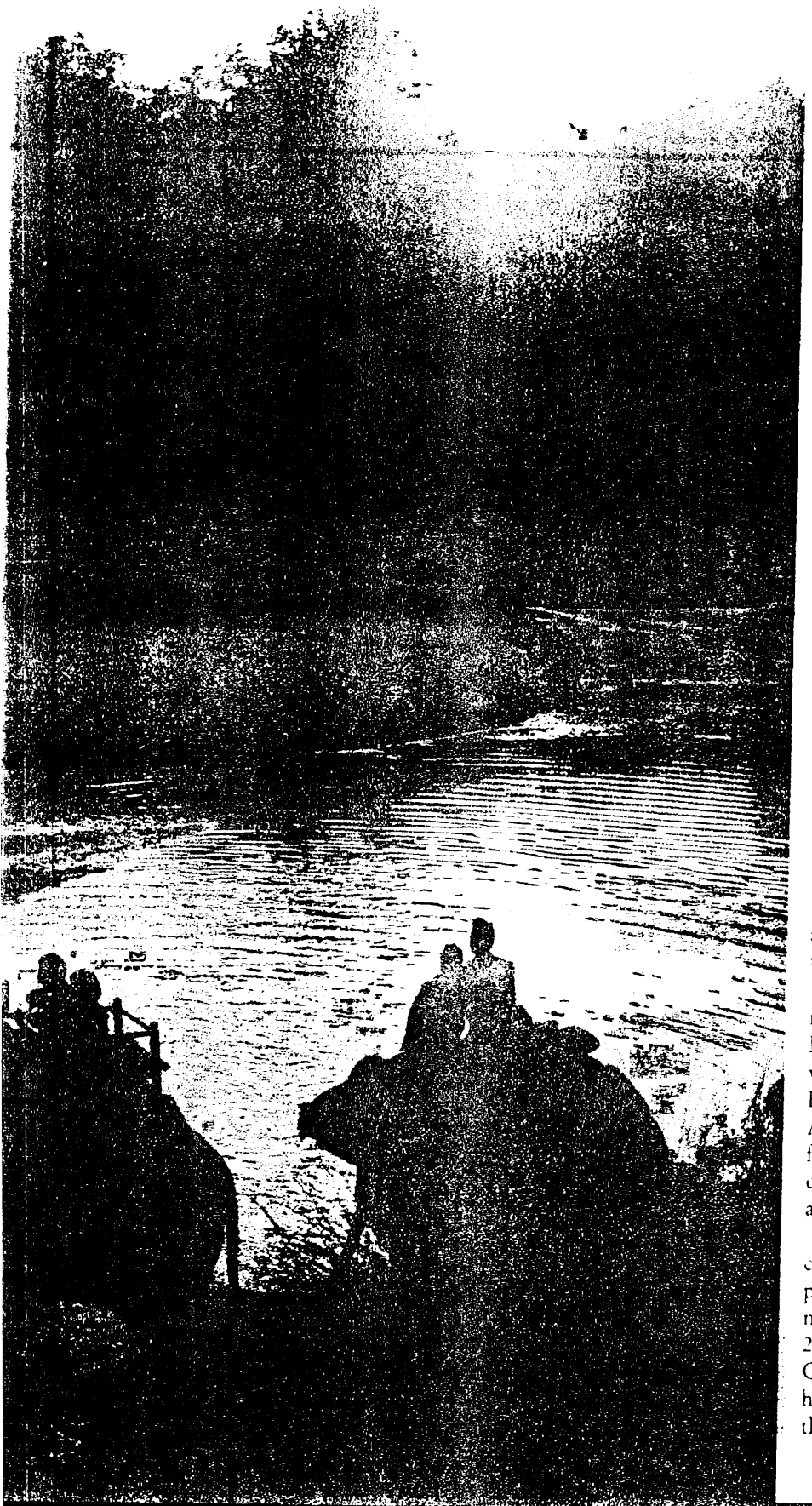
BURGER

A Passage to India

Kaziranga National Park, in Assam, provides visitors with a window on the past, a time when wildlife swarmed over the subcontinent.

By Janis Burger





The rising sun is attempting to burn through thick valley fog, but still we can see only 30 yards ahead. Abruptly, the lead elephant driver, or mahout, motions us to be quiet as the huge gray back of an Indian rhino looms out of the mist in the tall grasses. Ten feet long, five feet high, and weighing around two tons, the rhino looks like a massive, barely animate boulder among the canes.

We are making our way on elephantback through Kaziranga National Park, a beleaguered patch of floodplain and monsoon forest along the Brahmaputra River in Assam, a state in northeastern India. The park attracts visitors from all over the world, who come to see Indian rhinos. Its grasslands, forests, and bheels, or shallow lakes, are crucial refuges not only for the star attractions but also for Asian elephants, Bengal tigers, water buffalos, sloth bears, capped langurs, Hoolock gibbons, leopards, and barasinghas (a species of deer, similar to, but smaller than, the North American elk).

Nearly 100 inches of rain a year nourish dense tropical jungle in the Mikir foothills, south of the park, where great pied hornbills and Hoolock gibbons call in the trees. Above the canopy, scarlet minivets flash red, yellow, and black as they descend on the treetops like gulls on a shoal of herring.

In the floodplain of the river, side channels snake their way through expanses of elephant grass, a collective name for the grasses that tower 15 to 20 feet, dwarfing anyone on foot. Great egrets, brahminy ducks, barheaded geese, and dabchicks cruise the bheels, and yellow-wattled lap-

Though rhinos are killed primarily for their horn, all their body parts are reputed to have beneficial powers, from curing nosebleeds to treating polio.

Pages 72 and 73:
For visitors to Kaziranga, the best way to view the park's wildlife is to ride trained elephants.

Above:
More and more of the forest surrounding the park is being cut for firewood, which causes unnaturally high floods.

wings patrol the muddy banks. Luxuriant islands of evergreen forest anchor the high ground in this sea of grass. Huge, buttressed silk cotton trees grow on these islands, their branches festooned with epiphytes and their canopies quivering with feeding parakeets.

But like many national parks around the world, Kaziranga is vulnerable. No buffer zone protects the park's perimeter from encroachments. To the east, south, and west lie coffee, tea, and rubber plantations, rice paddies, and pastures, and villages cluster along the national highway, the major east–west artery from India to Burma. This highway forms a corridor that separates the park from the Mikir Hills, which harbor much of the area's diverse fauna and flora.

Along the northern boundary flows the mighty Brahmaputra. Each summer the river swells with monsoon rains and inundates Kaziranga's floodplain, as it has for millennia, enriching the soil and clearing the bheels of thick mats of exotic purple water hyacinths. The floods force animals to retreat to the forested islands or to large earthen mounds constructed by the Department of Forestry. Many animals leave the safety of the park and cross the highway, seeking refuge in the Mikir Hills. As people continue to alter the natural forest cover, the floods peak at higher levels, sometimes covering more than three-quarters of the park.

In 1988, areas normally high and dry were submerged by heightened floodwaters, forcing even the rhinos to swim swollen channels in search of food and higher ground. At least 38 rhinos—23 of them calves—drowned or starved. Proposals have been drafted for expanding the park into a section of the foothills to provide the animals with a safe retreat during the summer monsoon.

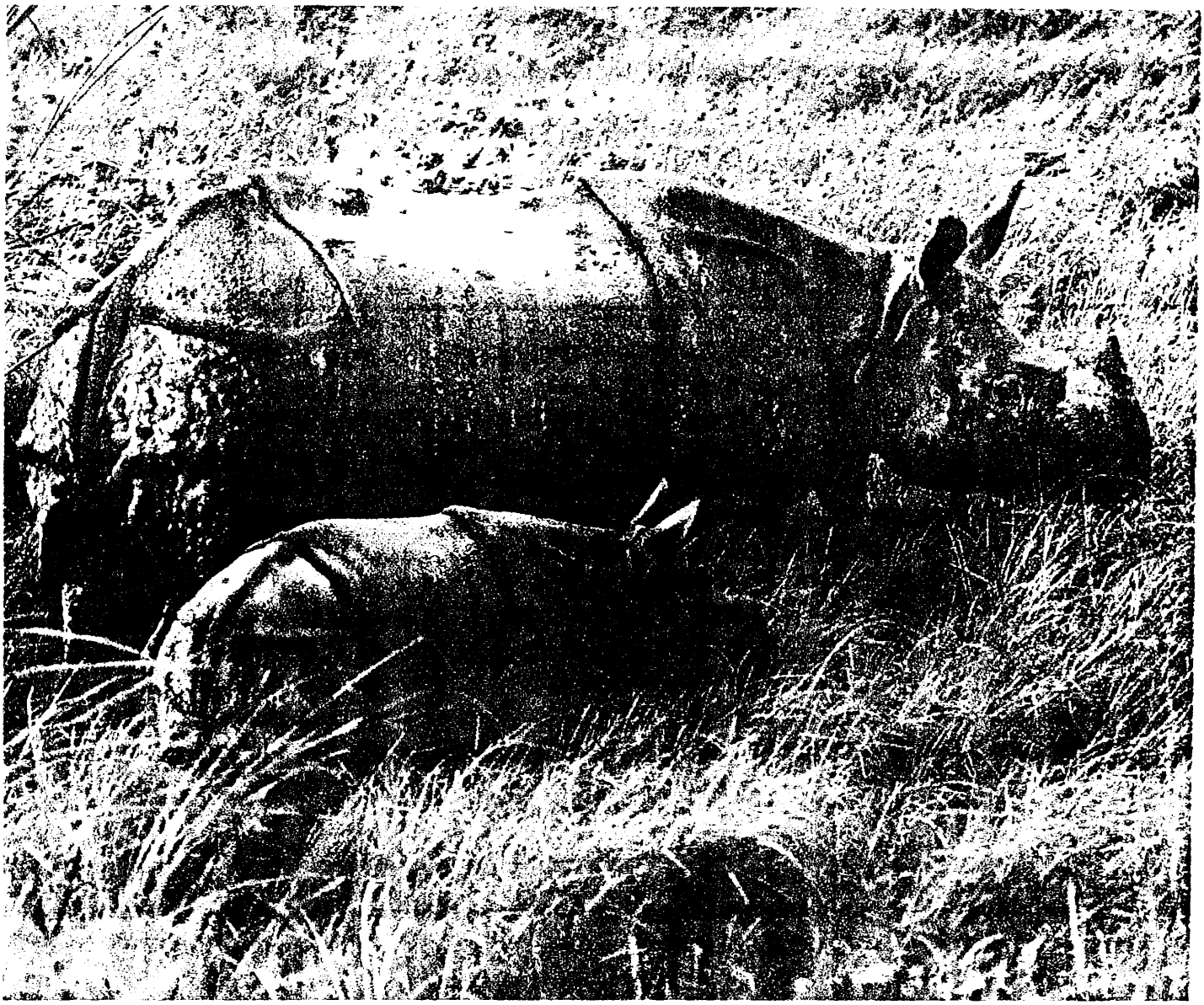
These same hills are a haven for poachers. Legend maintains that the Indian rhinoceros, with its heavy folds of skin resembling plates of armor, is invincible, that nothing can pierce its tough hide. But the poachers have proved otherwise. Because they use the same travel routes, wallows, and communal dung piles each day, Indian rhinos are especially vulnerable to poachers' guns and pits.

According to Esmond Bradley Martin, a wildlife-trade investigator who monitors the traffic in rhino horns, an average of 31 animals were killed each year in the first half of the 1980s. That rate has slowed slightly during the last few years. Rhino and other animal parts have been used in traditional medicines in India and Southeast Asia for centuries. Though rhinos are killed primarily for their horns, all their body parts are reputed to have beneficial powers, from curing nosebleeds to treating polio.

The import and export of rhino horn is illegal in India, but in 1980, Martin discovered that a poacher could get $875 for an Indian rhino horn that would later sell for anywhere from $6,000 to $9,000 a kilogram (around 2.2 pounds) at wholesale markets in Southeast Asia. At that time, $875 equaled about three-years' wages for a farm laborer or hotel waiter.

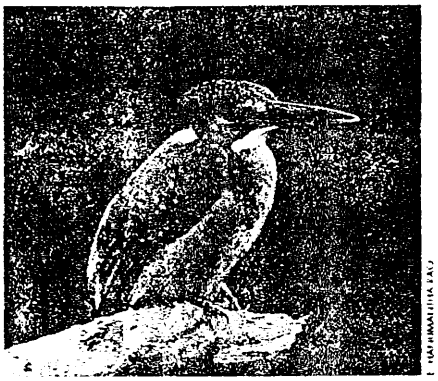
At one time, three species of rhinos lived in India, but now the Javan and the Sumatran rhinos are gone (only small populations of each remain in Southeast Asia). The Indian rhino, the most widespread of the three, once grazed river valleys from the Indus, in what is now Pakistan, across northern India and southern Nepal, to the Brahmaputra Valley in the east. But their floodplain habitat was prime human real estate, and much of it quickly disappeared under villages and crops.

By 1900, only about 12 one-horned rhinos were left in the Kaziranga area. India abolished rhino hunting in 1910, and Kaziranga's population slowly recovered. The area now has about 1,200 one-horned rhinos—more than 60 percent of the world total. The rest can be found in smaller populations scattered in sanctuaries in northeastern India and neighboring Nepal. Animals from Kaziranga and Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park, which has the second-largest population, have been relocated to two other reserves in an attempt to reintroduce the species to parts of its former range.



Left: Each summer, monsoon rains swell the Brahmaputra River, which borders the park. The floodwaters enrich the soil in adjacent fields of rice, still plowed by water buffalos.

Above: Heightened floodwaters force the rhinos and other wildlife to seek refuge, often outside the safety of the national park.



Kaziranga, where the horizon is dominated by the towering Himalayas, provides an exquisite sanctuary for its wildlife, including (clockwise from top) great pied hornbills, common langurs, ruddy shelducks, bronze-winged jacanas, and common kingfishers.

At Mihumukh, where the park's riding elephants are stabled, tourists wait, watching mahouts cinch riding platforms, called howdahs, to their elephants' backs. Early morning excursions on elephants are really the only way to search for wildlife in this park. Thick grass, tigers, rhinos, elephants, and irritable buffalos make exploration on foot less than prudent. Besides, the trained elephants can approach to within about 50 feet of a rhinoceros chomping on vegetation or wallowing in skin-soothing mud, giving visitors an unforgettable view.

Riding an elephant is awkward at first. With each lurching step, you wonder if you'll be tossed out of the howdah. But the animal's cautious stride is ideal for traversing the tall elephant grass and marshy bheels, where mud-caked water buffalos and barasinghas feed, luminous white cattle egrets perched on their backs.

Observation platforms scattered around the park offer even higher vantage points than an elephant's back. At one site, the distant snow-capped Himalayas form an impressive backdrop. Screeching blossom-headed parakeets forage in the branches of the trees. Below, wild boars, some hog deer, and several rhinos graze. One of the rhinos has a calf at her side. Though the adult has only man and floods to fear, the calf faces another danger: Kaziranga's tigers take an average of six rhino calves a year.

The tiger is the symbol of India's conservation movement. In the early 1900s, India had perhaps 40,000 tigers. By 1972, there were fewer than 2,000. That year, India's Wildlife Protection Act was passed to preserve the subcontinent's disappearing fauna. Project Tiger was also initiated, establishing nine tiger reserves to nurture the population back to health. In 1986, there were more than 4,000 tigers nationwide. Fifty to 60 of those live in Kaziranga.

But as we pass through a closely manicured tea plantation alongside the Mikir Hills, I worry about the pressure of development. Young green tea leaves on waist-high bushes spread along the foothills for miles.

In a large open shed, women squat among row upon row of tiny tea bushes, potting cuttings that will soon be planted. Behind the tea, dense evergreen forest rises like a shadowy wall.

Huge foot-wide depressions pock the mud skirting the forest—wild elephant tracks. Elephants usually migrate between the hills and the lowlands with the seasons. But the widening cultivated strip along the highway is making the trip more and more difficult.

It is the forest-dwelling wildlife—the hornbills, the capped langurs, the Hoolock gibbons, the elephants—that have suffered most from deforestation and population growth along the highway. A railway was planned to parallel the already busy corridor, prompting the IUCN–World Conservation Union to put Kaziranga on its list of threatened protected areas. Though plans for the railway have been dropped, development will not stop. Last January, plans were announced to build an oil refinery upstream from the park.

Rhesus macaques

India has been successful in building a conservation movement, in designating reserves, and in increasing the numbers of tigers and rhinos. But in a developing country with more than 850 million people and many divisive regional conflicts, keeping conservation a priority is a difficult task. Without some incentive, there is little reason for villagers to honor reserve boundaries and restrictions and for poorly paid forest guards to undertake dangerous anti-poaching patrols.

In his 1969 book, *The Twilight of India's Wildlife*, conservationist Balakrishna Seshadri wrote: "Nowhere in the world has the destruction of the natural wilderness—the habitat of wildlife—proceeded with such speed and totality as on the Indian subcontinent."

True, much of the early abundance is gone, but India still has a priceless wildlife heritage. Snow leopards still stalk prey in the Himalayas. Blackbucks still spar in the desert of the northwest. Elephants still roam along Periyar Lake in the far south. Tigers still intimidate villagers in the mangroves of the Sunderbans. And the parcel of Brahmaputra floodplain in Kaziranga National Park is home to one of the most diverse collections of animals left on the subcontinent. It's one place where you can still peer through the morning fog and expect to glimpse the hulking form of an Indian rhino placidly feeding in the elephant grass. □

THE WAY TO KAZIRANGA

Guwahati, gateway to the northeastern regions of India and premier city of Assam, is connected by air to New Delhi—the nation's capital—and to Calcutta and other northeastern airports. From Guwahati, you can travel by plane or train, or drive on excellent roads, to the town of Jorhat, about 57 miles from the park. Reservations for Kaziranga's forest lodge and tourist bungalows can be made in Guwahati 10 days in advance. The best time to visit is November through March. The climate is cool and bracing, so be prepared with light woolen clothing.

A pair of rose-ringed parakeets excavate a nest hole.

Houses have been built along the broad channels of the Brahmaputra River.

The simplest way of seeing the park is to join an organized tour group in Guwahati. If you choose to visit on your own, you'll need a permit, obtainable from an Indian embassy or consulate in the U.S., or from various sources once you reach India. For more information, contact the Government of India Tourist Office, B. K. Kakati Road, Ulubari, Guwahati, Assam, India, or write to the Director, Kaziranga National Park, P.O. Bokaghat, Dist: Jorhat, Assam, India 785612.