

WILD INDIA

The wildlife and scenery of India and Nepal



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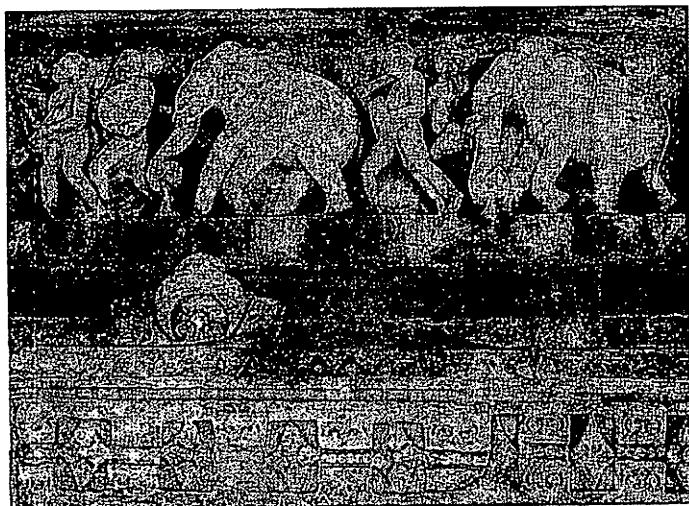
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mating with them when domesticated females are on heat. The other is to erect simple two-strand electrified fences, which the elephants soon learn to respect. Protected areas for ensuring the long-term survival of elephants need to be large, typically a few thousand square kilometres, but few of these exist. The Government of India is in the process of launching Project Elephant, along the lines of Project Tiger. The aims of the project will be directed towards more effective management of elephant habitats and populations, including measures to reduce straying by elephants in order to mitigate damage to crops and the loss of human life.

Riding a well-trained elephant is still incomparably the best method for seeing wildlife in India. I have often been able to approach Tigers and other big game animals to within ten or twelve metres by this means. Only a slowly paddled canoe on a river can compare with the silence of an elephant's progress through the jungle. Its instant response to a whispered command from the *mahout*, or to the pressure of his bare foot, is a revelation to those unaccustomed to the intelligence of these mighty animals.

The second largest animal of the subcontinent is the Great One-horned Rhinoceros. Of the world's five species, only the African White Rhinoceros exceeds it in weight. Its single stubby horn is rarely longer than 38 centimetres, the majority being much shorter. More than any other species it has a distinctly prehistoric appearance because of its massively folded hide, which is studded with rounded tubercles resembling rivet-heads, recalling the riveted armour on a 1918 army tank. Formerly distributed throughout the Gangetic



War elephants carved from stone in a tenth century wall frieze at the Lakshmana temple, Khajuraho.

plain and even in the middle reaches of the Indus in Pakistan (where a pair from Nepal has been reintroduced to the Lal Suhanra National Park), it is now restricted to a very few areas, such as the Kaziranga National Park and Manas Sanctuary in Assam, the Jaldapara Sanctuary in West Bengal and the Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal. The total number surviving is about 1300 in India and 400 in Nepal and they are breeding successfully under protection. In order to widen the distribution, rhinos have been reintroduced in 1984 to Dudwa National Park, Uttar Pradesh, and in 1986 to Royal Bardia National Park, Nepal. Recent reports indicate that 238 rhinos were poached in India between 1982 and 1985 but this rate of attrition has slowed down considerably due to successful protection programmes.

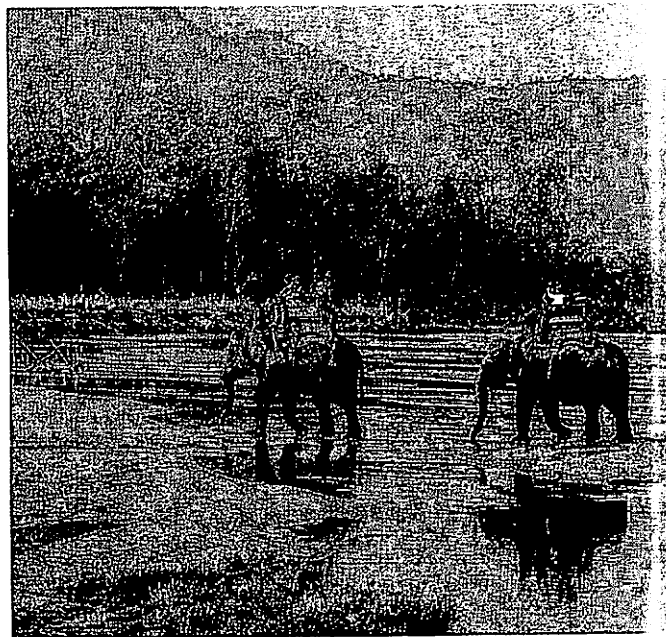
Like the African and other Asian species, the One-horned Rhinoceros has suffered persistent persecution for the supposed medicinal and to a lesser extent the aphrodisiac value of its horn. Currently, Indian rhino horn fetches the highest prices in Taiwan where, in 1990, its wholesale value was \$45,000 per kilogram. This escalating price is having an adverse effect on conservation: in Assam, 58 rhinos were killed in 1989, and in Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park 12 rhinos were taken by poachers between August 1989 and July 1990. Perhaps it is the extraordinary appearance and power of a rhino that have suggested magical properties to the superstitious, for every part of its carcass is valued. Even its urine is bottled and sold in Indian zoos as a cure for asthma. But to kill a 2½

ton rhino merely to cut off its horn, is like destroying a cathedral in order to steal the cross from its spire.

The much smaller Sumatran Rhinoceros, which once occupied the hills of Assam, may still wander occasionally from Burma into the Hill Tracts. In 1967 one was shot near Cox's Bazar and its carcass sold in small pieces in Chittagong for the equivalent of some \$1200. The Javan Rhinoceros, which occurred in the Sundarbans until 1900, is nearing extinction in Java.

One-horned Rhinoceroses are more solitary than their African relations. Like all rhinos they are rather morose and of uncertain temper, not hesitating, if accompanied by a calf, to charge at an intruding elephant. In a close attack they slash upwards with the powerful incisors rather than with their horns. I have watched two bull rhinos fighting and the collision was like that of two high-speed trains. They can run surprisingly quickly and I have been more frightened by them at night when camping in their neighbourhood than ever I was by Tigers, which much prefer to avoid contact with humans. However, One-horned Rhinoceroses can be observed without difficulty if one's elephant is well trained, as they are, for example, in the Kaziranga or Chitwan national parks.

Among the many even-toed ungulates of the subcontinent — the wild oxen, sheep, goats, antelopes and boar — the massive Gaur, or Indian Bison, takes pride of place. Standing nearly two metres at the shoulder and weighing 900 kilograms or more, a bull Gaur is a magnificent animal. Its sleek hide is a gleaming black, with striking



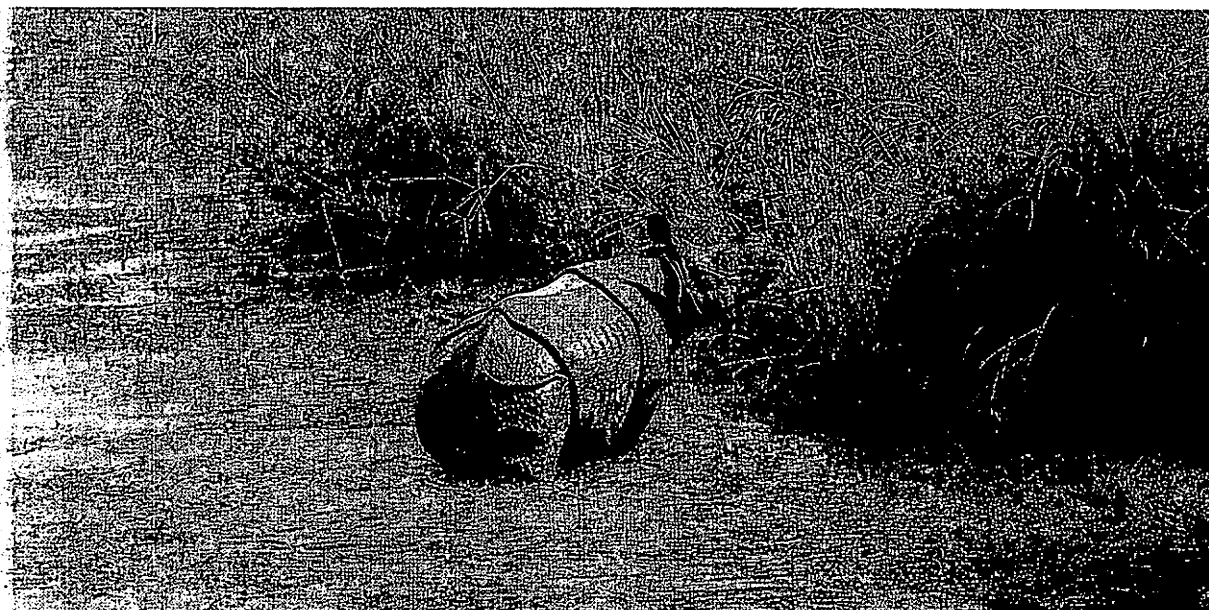
In Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park, tourists are conveyed through the jungle for game viewing on trained elephants.

white 'stockings'. Its horns are short and curved and its enormous shoulders are ridged as far as the middle of its back. In spite of such an imposing appearance, however, Gaur are timid, forest-loving creatures, moving about in small family herds and descending from the hills to graze in the valleys at dawn and again in late afternoon. Their only enemy is the Tiger, which preys on the smaller cows and calves, very rarely tackling a full-grown bull. These splendid animals are now chiefly restricted to the eastern and southern hill forests. They can be seen in such protected areas as the Bandipur National Park in Karnataka State and the adjoining Mudumalai in Tamil Nadu. There are a few in the Kanha National Park in Madhya Pradesh and I have occasionally seen a herd in the western part of the Chitwan National Park in Nepal when fresh grass was just emerging. Gaur have never been domesticated, although hybrids with domestic cattle do occur occasionally. It seems possible that such crosses led to the creation of the Gayal, or Mithun, which resembles a rather small Gaur with straighter horns. Gayals are at least now and then domesticated, as draught animals but for purposes of religious sacrifice, by some of the forest tribes such as the Moghs and Chakmas of the Hill Tracts. However, my companion Eric Hosking and I were once chased by a



After the Elephant, the One-horned Rhinoceros is the largest animal in the subcontinent. The biggest surviving population is in the Kaziranga National Park in Assam, where they can be approached quite closely by tourists riding well-trained elephants. Although the rhinos appear to be very tame, it is inadvisable to approach a cow with calf: the park wardens often have to fire a shot in the air in order





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