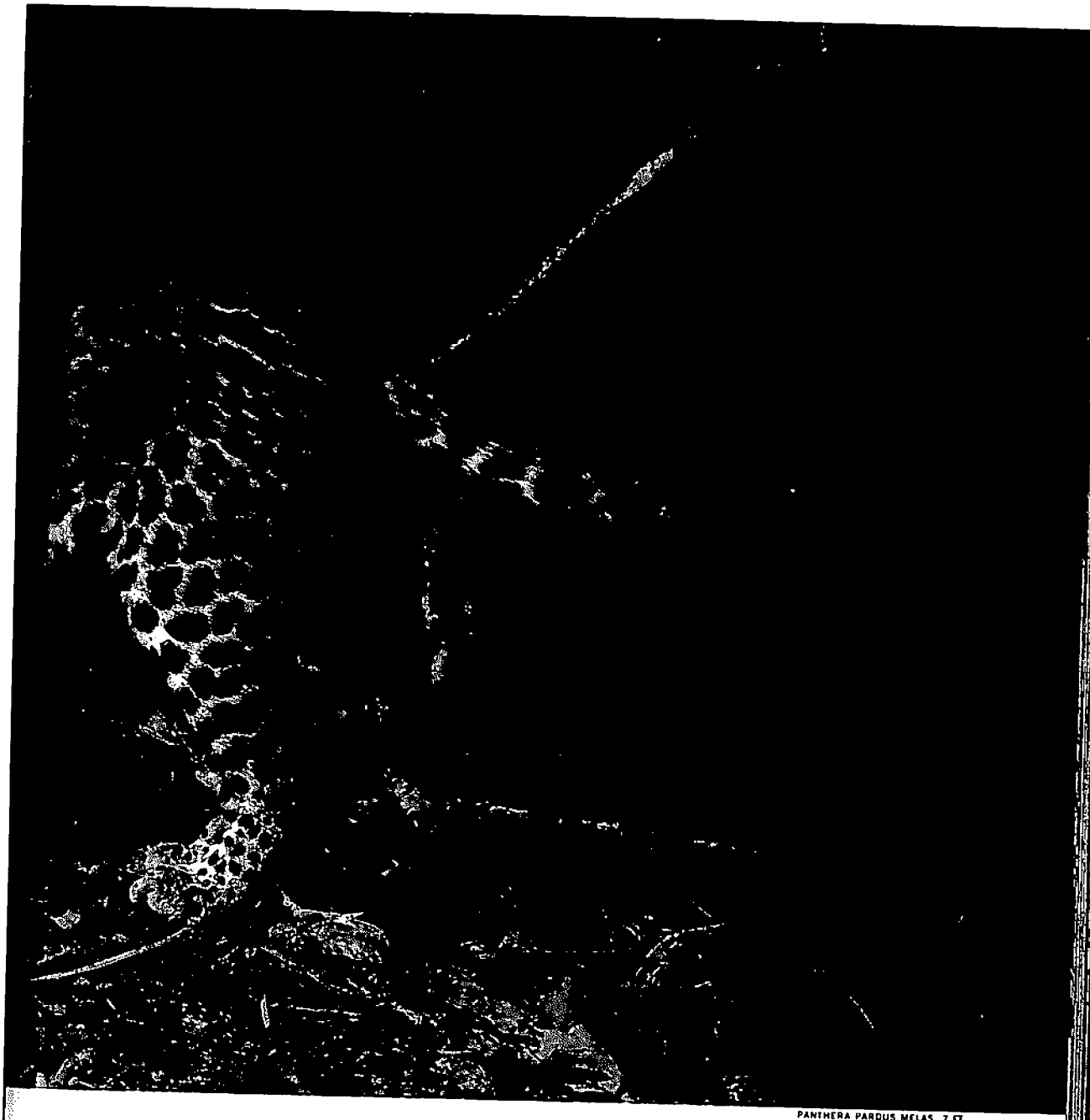
IN THE SHADOW OF KRAKATAU

Return of Java's Wildlife

Text and photographs by DIETER and MARY PLAGE



PANTHERA PARDUS MELAS, 7 FT

A *ROSETTED HIDE* melting into the rain forest in the flash of a second was all we saw. Yet despite our trackers' skepticism we were certain that the 40-foot tree had held a leopard, one of the shyest of cats, almost never seen in the wildlife reserve of Ujung Kulon Peninsula on the large island of Java.

We never got a better look, in the flesh. Instead we outwitted the leopards with remote camera and strobe lights (diagram, page 765) to let them photograph themselves, as did this lithe female, revealed in the night just after descending a tree.

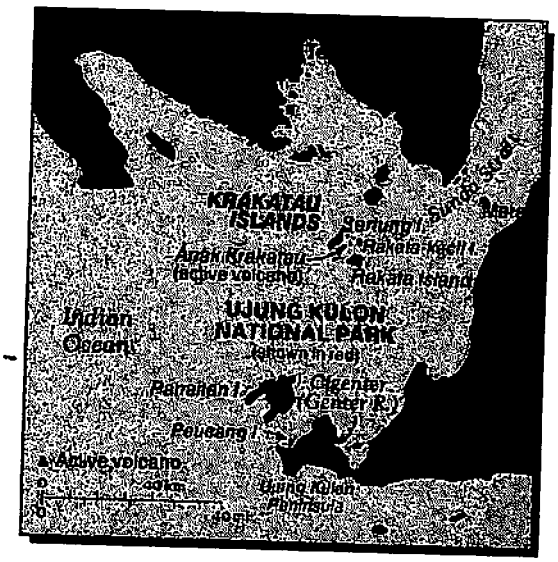
She indirectly owes her habitat to a world-famous volcano. Thirty-five miles across the sea from Ujung Kulon, the island of Krakatau ripped itself apart in 1883. Tsunamis reaching the Javanese shore washed away the few villages that dotted this isolated outpost. The people never returned; the wildlife did, and is protected today by the Ujung Kulon National Park. We spent a year there, examining the regeneration of life on both the peninsula and Krakatau a century after the eruption.

WHERE KRAKATAU'S tsunamis raged, the little Cigenter today flows placidly through Ujung Kulon. In our rubber inflatable (***right***), which is camouflaged with canvas and silently powered by a solar-charged electric motor, we made 113 trips up and down the river, filming for Survival Anglia Ltd.

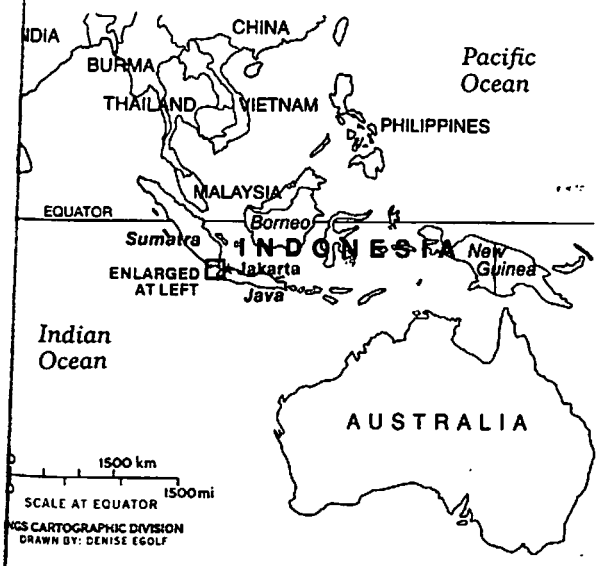
A banteng bull (***below, far right***) peers from the riverbank. Today numbering about 400, these wild oxen were one of three species the reserve was created to protect in 1921. Of the others, the Javan rhino clings to survival, but, tragically, the Javan tiger is now extinct. Early protection existed only on paper for this isolated area, and poachers, virtually unchecked, wrought disaster. With tenacious efforts by the Indonesian government and the World Wildlife Fund, the 294-square-mile reserve is now managed as a national park. Rangers patrol vigorously year-round; some live on offshore islands, where two guesthouses offer lodging for visitors.

We were entranced by the river and felt it laced with more than a touch of the prehistoric. The bankside jungle, drenched by an average annual rainfall of 106 inches, is draped with exotic fruits, tangles of lianas, and long gnarled roots that creep over the ground. At dawn great clouds of flying foxes—the world's largest bats, with a five-foot wingspan—blacken the sky. Along the banks swarms of insects attract appealing birds such as blue-throated bee-eaters, Asian fairy bluebirds, olive-backed sunbirds, scarlet-headed flowerpeckers, and gray-cheeked bulbuls.

In our tent on a meadow at the river's mouth, we subsisted comfortably on Indonesian fried rice and curried fish cooked in a makeshift kitchen under an observation tower. Home after a hard day, we often found more wildlife waiting for us. After dinner one evening Dieter quietly said to Alain Compost, our assistant, "Alain, slowly raise your feet just a little." Beneath them slid a black-and-yellow snake—the highly venomous banded krait. On another occasion Dieter caught a sudden glimpse of motion inside the tent and ominously told Mary, who was just returning, "I think you'd better leave." Piece by piece he removed everything in the tent until he came to a woven palm mat. He pulled it up, and there lay a cobra. He regrets having to kill it, but it came straight for him.



BOTH BY ALAIN COMPOST. BOS JAVANICUS SHOWN BELOW



FACE TO FACE with one of earth's rarest and most endangered species, Dieter edges to within 30 feet of a Javan rhino. Browsing the vegetation, the big bull waggles his ears, searching for the source of an intrusion he senses but cannot quite locate. Tense and excited during this unprecedented photography, Dieter later recalled, "In the total silence the camera's shutter seemed like a pistol shot."

This image cost six months of work. Usually, like the old story about blind men examining a pachyderm, which the rhino is, we got only tantalizing bits—the glimpse of an ear here, a backside there. But enduring the rainy season, the only time the animals can be tracked, rewarded us. So did the two shrewd trackers the government insisted we travel with. Beset by mosquitoes and leeches, we slogged through knee-deep mud until one of the trackers spotted fresh rhino dung. He followed it into a tall, dense stand of our familiar nemesis, rattan, a formidable palm armed with thorns like treble fishing hooks. It would truly be a nightmare to be caught between a wall of this stuff and a charging rhino. Then, beyond it, we saw a tree move—and there was the magnificent bull. As we watched, he sprayed the surrounding undergrowth with urine, and a cow appeared, following his spoor.

These rhinos were two of only about 60 of their kind. Yet even this minuscule number is encouraging, because in 1967 the estimated population was about 25. The species' original range included parts of India, Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, Sumatra, and Java. The history of human depredation is long and sad. In the mid-18th century the rhinos in Java were so numerous and caused so much damage to agriculture that in less than two years the government paid high bounties for the killing of 526 animals. Hunters, both with and without scruples, took a disastrous toll. One so-called bona fide hunter shot nine rhinos around 1900.

By 1930 the rhino's once vast territory had withered to a few scattered pockets, including Ujung Kulon. In the next four decades in Java alone more than 40 of the animals were poached, condemned by the notorious Asian market for rhino products, chiefly the horn. In Indonesia it is prized as a cure for high fever and typhus, and as an anti-poison agent. Although the export of rhino horn has long been illegal, more than four million Chinese live in Indonesia, and their traders easily beat the competition in Hong Kong and Singapore. Asian horn is favored over African because its smaller size is believed to concentrate medicinal properties. One of the world's costliest illegal substances, rhino horn sells for nearly $50 a gram in Malaysia—a price approaching that of cocaine on the street in the United States.

Five feet tall and averaging 3,500 pounds, the Javan species is slightly smaller than the Indian rhino and somewhat larger than the Sumatran rhino. It is distinguished by its small horn—about ten inches long in the male, often absent or a small bulge in the female—and a prominent fold in the hide in front of the shoulder. It inhabits the most inaccessible parts of Ujung Kulon, and few details of its natural history are known.

Vegetarians, the rhinos feed primarily on the shoots of a variety of young trees. To reach their forage, they frequently walk over the saplings, forcing them down between their front legs. The beach commonly bears their tracks; one observer saw them knee-deep in the sea and believed they ate drifting mangroves. Inland they often wallow in mudholes to cool off, soften their skin, and relieve it of parasites.

Females probably mature sexually by three years of age, males about twice that. Frightful roaring and aggressive behavior by bulls may be associated with the rut, which apparently occurs nonseasonally and sporadically. Gestation may take 16 months, and the cow probably accompanies her calf for about two years. Rhinos are wonderfully long-lived beasts, and it would not be surprising for some of Ujung Kulon's old-timers to have been there for 40 years.

With the extinction of the Javan tiger, only man remains as the rhino's predator. A fascinating story exists regarding this deadly triangle. When tigers still lived, Javanese in these parts believed that their ancestors' souls reposed in the cats and thus refused to help poachers kill them. After World War II a group of poachers planned an operation to wipe out all of Ujung Kulon's rhinos. When they entered the peninsula, one was killed by a tiger. Since none of the nearby villagers would help them against the tigers, the poachers gave up. How strange if one species that ultimately perished had inadvertently saved its equally rare neighbor. RHINOCEROS SONDAICUS

IN A CLOSE ENCOUNTER we surprise a cow feeding along the riverbank (***left***), using her prehensile upper lip to seize small branches. Hearing Mary's camera, she looked up, then charged across the river—to a point 30 feet behind us.

When another cow came toward Dieter and turned, he thought he was seeing things. She had too many legs. Then he realized that she had a calf tucked behind her (***below***). Here is heartening evidence that an endangered animal is reproducing. Nevertheless, rhino authority Rudi Schenkel cautions that a second sanctuary must be established to prevent a deadly disease from wiping out the population.