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Where Flying Vultures Reveal Secrets—Kaziranga

By

DR. ROBIN BANERJEE

The vast region of India has a rich and varied fauna comprising of more than 1000 species of birds, insects, reptiles and fishes, and more than 500 types of animals. In the west, the wild ass of Kutch, the Gir lion, black buck etc., are noteworthy; the water buffalo, rhinoceros, pigmy hog, thamin deer etc., in the east; mountain sheep and goats in the extreme north, while animals like cheetal, sloth bear, gaur, tiger, elephant etc., have wide distribution throughout the country. Many of them are most important economically.

In India we had large numbers of these animals and a rich variety of birds until a few decades ago, but with indiscriminate killing in recent years, a great many have decreased in numbers and some of them have already vanished, for example the Hunting Cheetah.

Why is our wild life vanishing everywhere? In the past, extensive forests provided shelter and protection to wild life and they also provided a good past-time and recreation to the sportsmen who love shooting, just for sport and not for the lust of killing indiscriminately, irrespective of the sex. Even pregnant females were not spared and they were killed at night with spotlights when animals are helpless.

The One-horned Rhino was about to disappear in 1908, but, for the foresight of the then British forest officer, who took steps to protect them in the Kaziranga Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam, which will soon be declared a National Park; and I only hope, not in name only.

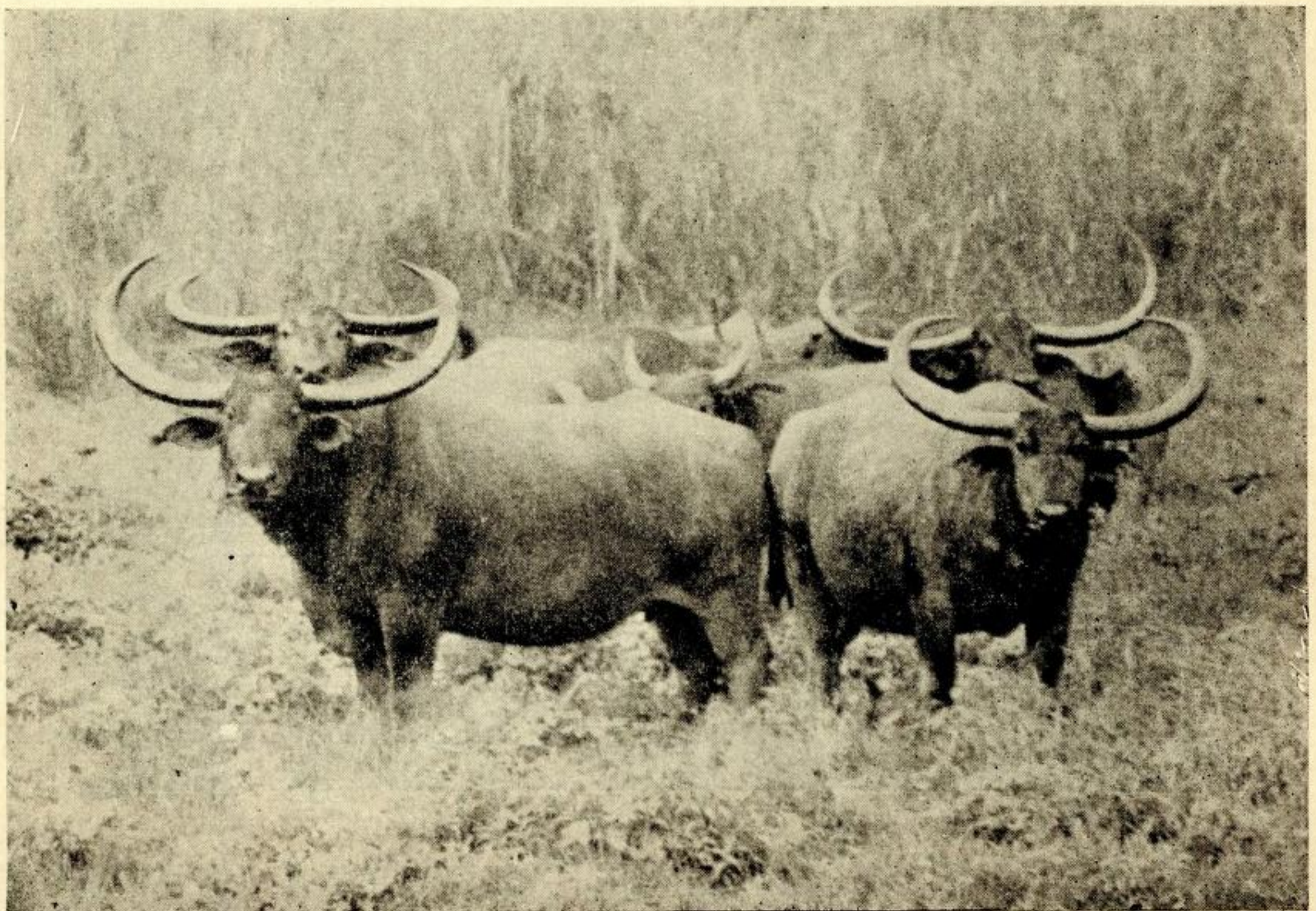
Overhunting, and over-intensive transformation of habitats, have reduced numerous animal populations to the point of extinction. The chief sufferer has been the rhinoceros, which was slaughtered, to satisfy the demands of Chinese pharmacists since the rhinoceros horn is famous for its alleged aphrodisiac properties. High prices (up to half its weight in gold) caused the massacre of this unfortunate animal, and today all Asiatic rhinoceroses are rare.

Indian rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) have now disappeared from a vast area, stretching from north-western India to the Indo-Chinese peninsula. There are approximately 700 in Nepal, West Bengal and Assam.

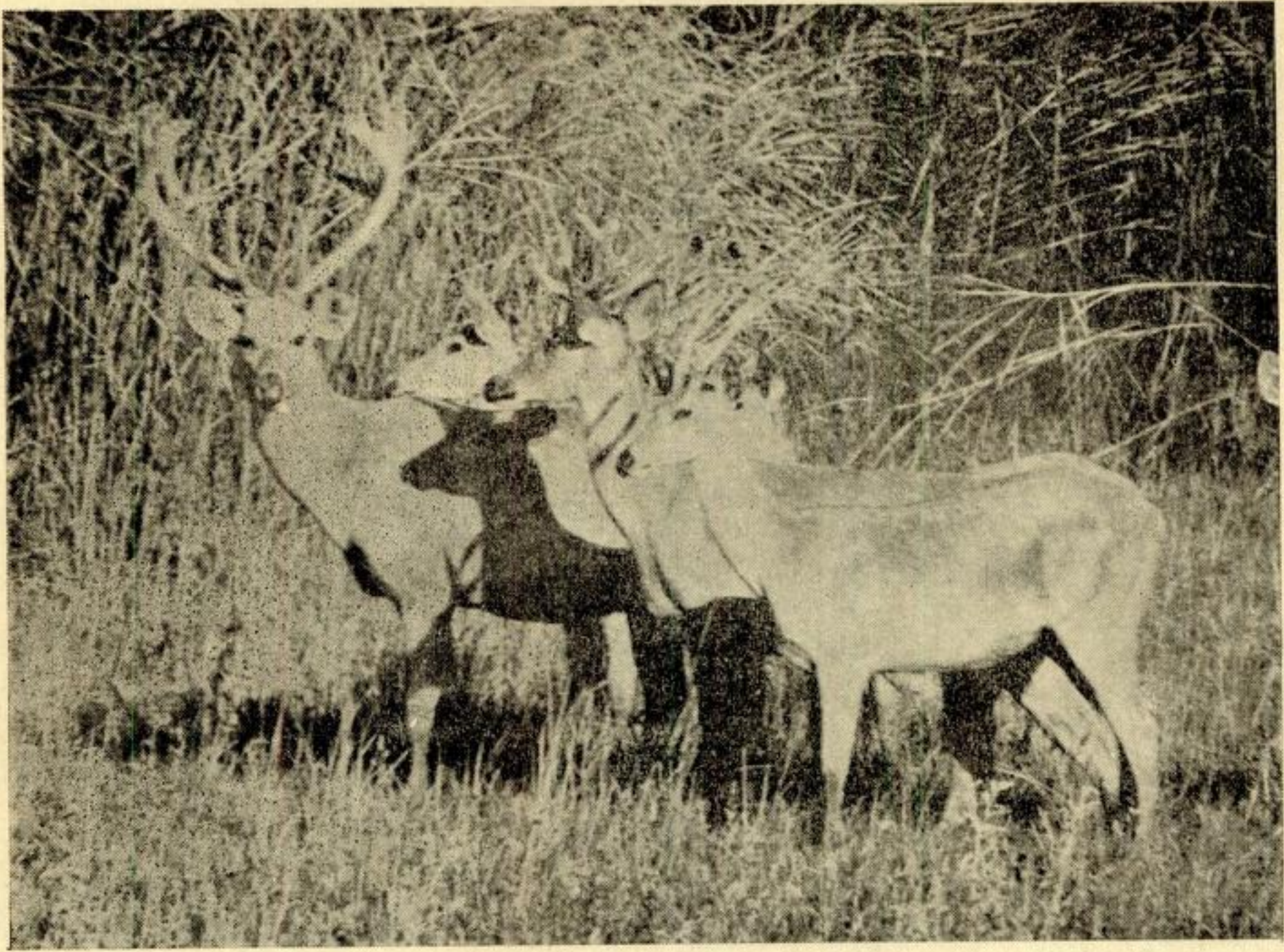
Rhinoceroses are odd toes mammals with three toes. The middle toe is the most highly developed and has the broadest hoof. There is an elastic pad on the sole of the foot, similar to that in elephants. The horn, for which the rhinos are noted, is not made of bone or horn; it is a protuberance of the skin and consists of compressed fur-like fibres. Some species



Mother and baby Rhino in the waterhole.



Wild Buffaloes.



Swamp deer herd.



A rhino pair in Kaziranga.

have two horns: others have only one. Rhinoceroses in the zoos, have been observed shedding their horns in the same way, as stags shed their antlers, but this happens only about once in ten years. The new horn begins to grow again on the scar left by the old.

Rhinoceroses are territorial and remain on the same range throughout their lives. They have fixed trackways through the vegetation, which they use when going to graze, or to watering places. They have also fixed dung places and each beast has its own wallow. This unfortunate habit helps the poachers to kill them by the pit method. The rhino struggles vigorously *inside* the small, pit and finally breaks its neck. The poachers usually wait for the signal of the flying vultures, then appear at the dead of night to collect the horn only.

Most of the wild animals of India, usually run away from danger and conceal themselves in thick cover but the rhino does the opposite. It continues grazing till danger is rather close, and then, instead of retreating and taking over it exposes itself still more, by charging. This peculiar habit helps the poachers to shoot at close range with country made lead bullets or with high powered rifles fitted with a telescope.

I believe, that an organized intelligent body, either at Calcutta or Bombay usually conducts the poaching for rhinos. They have connections with an international gang, for the final disposal of the horn to the outside market. The local people staying on the border of the Sanctuary, generally act as informers and assist in the poaching.

This is one of the major wildlife problems facing India today. Unless measures are taken to preserve our wildlife it will not be long before it will be lost to us and the generations that follow.

For effective preservation, very strict anti-poaching measure must be taken before it is too late, and I suggest the following:—

- (1) Most important of all, is public awareness of the problems by film shows and propoganda; an informed public is the best safeguard for the integrity of the sanctuary.
- (2) Conservation education in schools and colleges.
- (3) Rifles for patrolling parties and motor boats on the Brahmaputra.
- (4) Elephants for anti-poaching operations in inaccessible areas.
- (5) More forest guards for patrolling specially after the rains (monsoons).
- (6) Funds should be provided to improve the existing roads.
- (7) Walkie-talkies for sending messages from Camp to Kohora (Headquarters).
- (8) Tranquilliser guns for treating injured animals.
- (9) Better patrolling facilities.

On my appeal last year, Dr. Grzimek, Director, Frankfurt Zoological Society, offered money for rifles and elephants. I would also like to mention the name of Prof. Ullrich, Director of Dresden Zoological Society, who offered money for buying elephants. The World Wild Life Fund has given money to buy motor boats for patrolling.

A major shortcoming of the sanctuary is that domestic livestock is permitted to graze within its boundaries. In theory, domestic livestock is allowed to use only a very small part of the Sanctuary; an area of about 3 miles long and one mile deep, but in practice they use much more. A considerable threat to the rhino, and other wild animal species has therefore developed through competition for the limited available fodder, and there is a possibility that disease may spread. Another unfortunate story, is that every year the river Brahmaputra takes away a lot of land through erosion hence it is essential that measures should be taken to exclude all domestic animals from Kaziranga, so that it could become a real sanctuary.

It will not be out of place to mention here, that, the Government of Nepal has set a splendid example to India and other countries, of what can be done with a little drive and determination, to safeguard an endangered species. The Rapti Valley, which was originally the hunting grounds of the powerful Rana family is now a proposed National Park. In 1965 some 22,000 peoples had been removed from these forest including 4,000 from the proposed National Park itself. As a result, poaching has been brought under firm control.

In Assam an increasing number of tourists come every year to see the rhinos in Kaziranga. Strict protection and ample habitat must be assured, if it is to survive from the cruel hands of poachers. The local people should join hands with the management to protect this endangered species. With the assistance being received from the I.U.C.N. and the World Wildlife Fund projects it is a much easier for us to solve the problem of wildlife conservation provided we take the pledge recommended by the Government of India 'I give my solemn pledge to protect our country's wild life and its forests from unnecessary destruction'.



For India's threatened hardground barasingha "thou inheritor of unfulfilled renown"—
fawn and going mother. *Photograph by Shri M. Krishnan.*



Fresh rhino kill by a poacher. *Photograph by Shri R. Bannerjee.*