

## Himalayan Blue Poppy

The Apr-Jun 2007 issue of the *Hornbill* carries on its cover an exquisite colour photograph of the Himalayan Blue Poppy. Looking at it, a thought crossed my mind that readers of the *Hornbill* might perhaps want to know where, when and by whom was this flower first discovered for science? And later even introduced in the gardens of European homesteads?

Believe it or not but this beautiful flower was first glimpsed by an amateur naturalist in the course of an ugly and an unprovoked war against an ill-matched adversary. While exposure to battle tends to brutalise the psyche of some combatants, in others it arouses the instincts for the aesthetic and the supra-natural. Capt. F.M. Bailey belonged to the latter class.

The British Expeditionary Force to Lhasa (1903-1904) had entered Tibet from Jelep La in Sikkim and took the route Yatung-Gyantse-Chaksam (the ferry over the Tsangpo) and on to Lhasa. Having cleared the only entrenched opposition en route at the Gyantse Jongcum-monastery, thirteen days later they were briefly halted again by snipers at Karo La 4,876 m (16,000 ft above msl).

And it was on July 17, 1904 that "they had camped by the over-hanging glacier just short of Karo Pass, in a meadow known as the Field of Milk, laced with tiny rivulets whose banks



were covered with shoots of a flower which a decade later was identified and named by F.M. Bailey: *Meconopsis betenocifolia baileyi*. A more beautiful or awe-inspiring camp site could not have been imagined" wrote Charles Allen, a century later in his book *DUEL IN THE SNOWS* published in 2004! No one could have better described the serene beauty of the Field of Milk than Allen, as in the company of his wife he actually trod over most of the route preparatory to writing the book.

Half a century prior to Allen's book, reminiscing in his retirement Lt. Col. F.M. Bailey (affectionately called Hatter Bailey, that is, mad-as-a-hatter!) had written in his book *NO PASSPORT TO TIBET*, published in 1957, in which he credits his friend Capt. Kingdon Ward for collecting the seeds of this poppy thus: "we collected several new butterflies and among the flora we observed was a blue poppy which when Capt. Kingdon Ward later brought the seed was to become a favourite among seedsmen under the name of *Meconopsis baileyi*".

Now where Bailey's collection of butterflies in Tibet is concerned, it was described in detail in the *JBNHS* Vol. XXIII pp 532-46 by Brig W.H. Evans, the 'Father of Indian Butterflies'. Coincidentally, both officers belonged to the Indian Army's Corps of Engineers. Brig Evans too was blooded on the battle fields but in France, won the DSO (Distinguished Service Order) for bravery and despite permanent damage to one lung and one knee lived to a ripe old age, working to the last day in an honorary capacity at the British Museum of Natural History, London, and authored definitive books separately on the butterflies of Europe, the Americas and Australia.

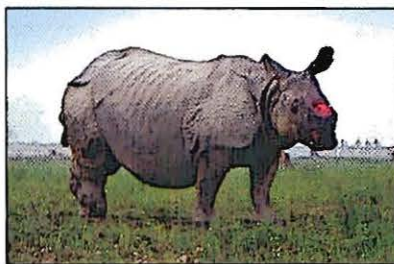
Wonder why from the current nomenclature of the Himalayan Blue Poppy '*Meconopsis aculeata*', Bailey's name has been dropped? It is a great pity that in doing so, this beautiful flower has been robbed of a certain mystique and romance attached to it. Would this brief account entice some young scientists of the BNHS to walk the Chumbi Valley and up to the Gyantse Jong to update the lists of flora, fauna and lepidoptera compiled by the late Capts Bailey, Walton, Hingston and Col Sir Francis Young Husband in 1903-04!

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## ABOUT THE POSTER

**We regret to publish this** horrifying image of the bleeding Rhinoceros as Centerspread in our magazine. This is our serious attempt towards making people aware of the grave consequences of animal poaching. This dreadful act of peeling the Rhino horn led to a sad and agonizing death of the animal just a few minutes after it was photographed.

The exaggerated value attached to rhinoceros horn, and the superstitious

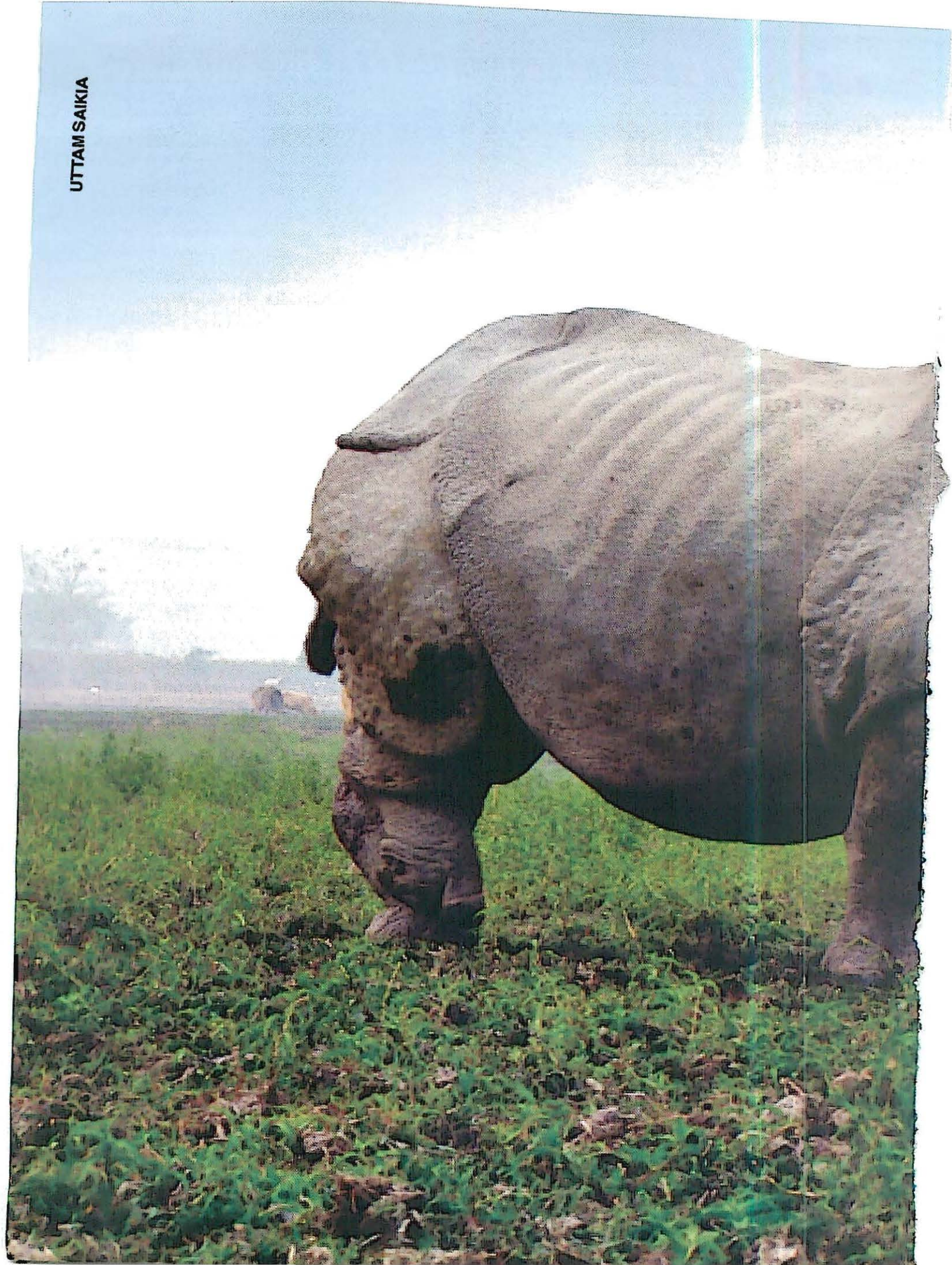


beliefs entertained regarding the magical power of the blood and other parts, and even the urine, of the animal have made it vulnerable; these animals stand in danger of extinction unless they are strictly protected.

The cruel act of animal poaching for the sake of wildlife trade should thus be stopped and necessary actions should be taken by the Government to save such vulnerable species. ■



UTTAM SAIKIA





**Great Indian onehorned Rhinoceros**  
***Rhinoceros unicornis***

