

WITH THE WILD ANIMALS
OF
BENGAL

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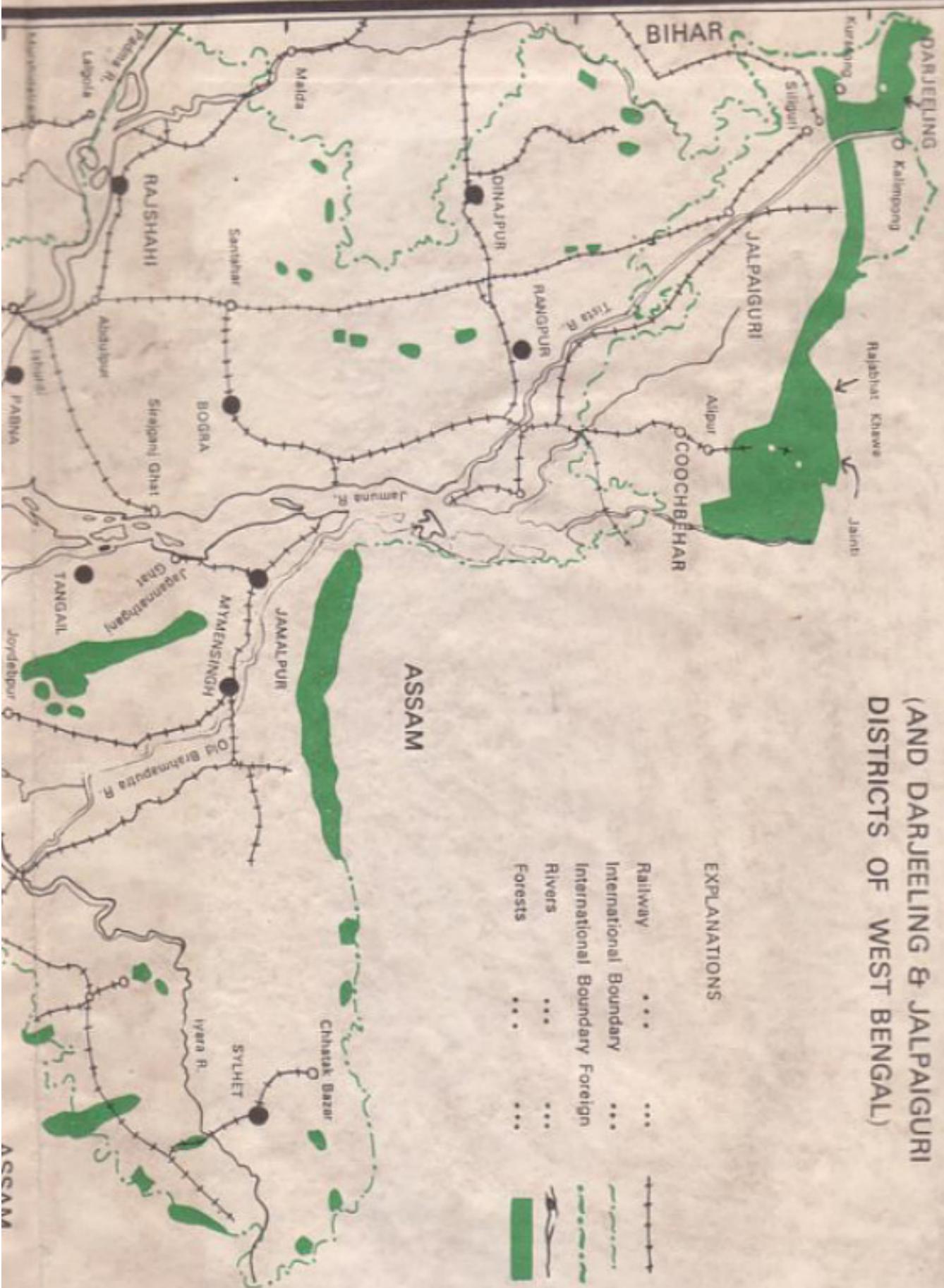
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MAP OF BANGLADESH (AND DARJEELING & JALPAIGURI DISTRICTS OF WEST BENGAL)

EXPLANATIONS

Railway	...	...	...
International Boundary	...	...	...
International Boundary Foreign	...	...	...
Rivers	***	***	***
Forests	...	...	...



BAY OF BENGAL



FOREWORD

One day my little son came to know that my friend, Mr. Yusuf S. Ahmad, had been a Forest Officer. "Then he knows all about forests and wild animals?" "Yes," I replied. "I wish he could tell some stories about wild animals to me."

This book surely fulfils his dream and the dreams of many children to hear stories about wild animals. These tales about Mr. Yusuf Ahmad's numerous encounters with the wild life of Bengal are varied and fascinating. Tiger, bison, bear, elephant, wild dog, game large and small, rare and common, are vividly portrayed here. Many of the stories are amusing but with a hidden menace lurking beneath. The reader is reminded again and again of what wild means—unpredictable, ferocious and cunning. Who would expect to find a tiger in a cow shed, or that one would chew through the walls of a hut to reach the humans within? The tamed appearance an elephant presents in the zoo is belied by the actuality in these pages. Wild animals are exactly that, wild and dangerous, and many of Mr. Ahmad's tales end violently for both animal and man.

Mr. Ahmad's life uniquely qualifies him to write this book. He entered the Imperial Forest Service in December 1925 after completing his studies at Cambridge University. He served in the forests of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Sundarbans, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Chittagong, Dacca, Mymensingh and Buxa Duar. After partition he was appointed the first Conservator of Forests in East Pakistan in 1947, and Inspector General of Forests for entire ~~Pakistan~~ in 1952. His contributions to forest management and conservation have been of great significance in both Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Through these pages his work in the forests and his love of forest life comes across strongly. An equally strong love, especially in his younger days, seems to have been shikar. Many of these stories are his shikar experiences and such is the clarity of his mind that his first encounter with a tiger rings fresh and lucid as if it happened last week instead of over 50 years ago.

These tales will delight all readers, young and old. Begun as stories told to his grandson he was persuaded to write them down and, finally, to publish them. The result is a fascinating book, a delight to read and a source of wonder and appreciation both of the animals of the forests and of the men who served in them.

Ellen Sattar
Dacca. 1981.

PREFACE

Having joined the Indian Forest Service, I was first posted to Jalpaiguri in Bengal, a province of British India. It was a haven for wild animals of many varieties and sizes, from elephants to quails. I worked in all the Forest Divisions of Bengal. During my long association with these forests of over thirty-three years from January 1926 to August 1959 I had many encounters with the wild life in this region. I had the good habit of maintaining a daily diary but the bad performance of never writing the interesting details of such encounters. I also had heard many thrilling stories of wild animals from others but never recorded them. In the beginning of my service, life was never dull in the forest as one could always expect to meet some animal or bird and get all the exciting experience that nature could provide if one would only enter into the forest at crack of dawn or late in the afternoon with a camera or a gun. Later the animals became so rare that their encounter became mere legends. To crown it all, I lost my diaries and photographs when my house was ransacked by the miscreants in January 1972 after the liberation war in Bangladesh.

My daughter, Rezia, was insistent on my putting down as many stories on paper as I still remembered. She was also the only person standing behind me when a charging wild tusker elephant was barely ten yards away from us before I shot it in February, 1948. We were then nearer to death together than ever. This book is therefore dedicated to her. Of my family members she has also been The One who has been beside me in a good few of the encounters and she amply deserves the privilege. Having lost my records from my diaries, I have been unable to mention in detail dates, names of persons and places concerned, except for those who were closely connected.

I am grateful and indebted to many contemporaries, friends and associates who have helped and suggested to me to put this manuscript into print, but, I feel I must particularly mention a few names—without their encouragement the book would never have been completed.

First, I am grateful to my friend, Principal Ebrahim Khan, a literator and a famous short stories writer of Bangladesh who very kindly went through the manuscript of my book and gave me several suggestions.

I would like to acknowledge the interest of the artist Kazi Abul Kasem, who advised that the book have as many illustrations as possible. I am indebted to Mr. A. Hamid, now the Inspector General of Forests of Bangladesh and to Mr. Salamat Ali, the Deputy Conservator of Forests for their assistance in collecting the coloured photographs.

Mr. Abdul Alim, the Conservator of Forests needs to be specially mentioned as he gave, ungrudgingly, many hours of his valuable time in reading and editing the manuscript.

And last, but not the least, I must acknowledge the invaluable help I received from my friends, Dr. A. Sattar and Dr. Ellen Sattar, without whose help this book could not have gone to the press for printing. Ellen Sattar has many publications to her credit and is a famous educationist. The form in which the book is printed is entirely at her suggestion.

Finally I would like to add that when I related some of the stories to my only grandson, Shahid Inam Chowdhury, his immediate reaction was, "NANA YOU MUST WRITE THEM UP." He regretted that he was born too late and could not join any of the thrilling incidents. With the fast rise in population in the country and the dwindling of the wild animals and birds in inverse ratio, it will be well nigh impossible for the youth to encounter the wild life as I did. For their benefit I sincerely hope that someday these stories may be translated into other languages.

Yusuf S. Ahmad.

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CHAPTER 4

OTHER ANIMAL ENCOUNTERS

Rhinoceros

The Asian Rhinoceros, which has only one horn on the nose, is the largest animal in the forests next to the elephant. It is a native to some parts of the riverain forests of North Bengal where there are patches of reed grass, the favourite fodder and habitat for this animal. It is found in the Nepal forests at the foot hills of the Himalayas but in North Bengal it is confined to a forest on an island in the Hasimara river. Apart from the special fodder, the rhinoceros needs plenty of water where it can wallow. It was said that once upon a time it was found in the Sundarbans where a stream is still called Gandamara khal, indicating that Gandar was once seen on its banks. The reed grass area has all been excluded from the Sundarbans Reserved Forests and brought under cultivation. At present there is no trace of this animal in any forest in Bangladesh.

The rhinoceros has a peculiar habit of coming to the same place to ease itself. Where fresh dung is noticed, one can sit on a tree, look out for it and even shoot at it as it generally comes back to the same spot for easing till the dung heap is so high that it is unable to stand on it. It then moves to another part. If disturbed, it moves from one part of the forest to another for quite some time until it has forgotten that it had been disturbed. It is rather a heavy foolish animal, which does not run very fast nor very far. Its single horn is very valuable for its aphrodisiac value and at one time there were lot of illicit killings for its horn. The carcasses were always found near the dung heap. For its protection a special Rhinoceros Act was passed and even possession of a rhino horn without a permit was an offence under the act. I still remember how the Member who piloted the bill was daubed as "Rhinoceros skinned" by the Congress opposition members in the legislative council in British Bengal.

A sanctuary was created in Hasimara forest of about twenty-one square miles where no shooting was allowed so that rhinoceros could live there undisturbed and breed freely.

Hasimara Rhinoceros.

The Hasimara Game Sanctuary was included in Buxa Division and I used to visit it once every two months while I was in charge of that Division. As all animals were protected, a special squad of Forest Guards was sanctioned for intensive patrol. It was also the charge of the Game Warden who was sanctioned a special pay for the work. I saw the largest tiger of Buxa Division in this forest which once just walked past my elephant and got into the Hasimara river for a dip. Sambhar deer used to walk with

the tame elephants and were never frightened as they knew that they would not be fired at. The hog deer used to roam about like herds of goats. Even jungle murgis, if found in the adjoining Chilapata forest would fly back to the sanctuary, when disturbed, as they knew that they could not be killed there.

To attract Tourist Traffic, I tried to train the forest department's elephants to face the rhinoceros so that the rhinoceros of the sanctuary could get used to the tame elephants. Every time I went to the sanctuary, I would take at least three elephants. The dung heaps, if fresh, would indicate the presence of rhinoceros in the neighbourhood. The Game Guards also knew about their number and location pretty well. At the beginning, I used to go after a single bull rhinoceros, the mother with a calf would be more dangerous. The rhinoceros would see the elephants from a distance and the elephants would also hesitate to get too close. Then the rhinoceros would bolt and stop again after running about two hundred yards. I used to surround it with the elephants, making a detour and blocking its escape. It would snort and run back to the original place. In course of time it realised that the elephants were harmless and the elephants also found it good fun to go near the rhinoceros.

Before I left Buxa Division, I found them in groups of four or five who would allow themselves to be photographed from the forest department's elephants. There were about twenty-five rhinoceros in Hasimara sanctuary in 1942.

Bisons

Bison or Gaur was the biggest bovine animal of the Bengal forests. It occurred in the foot hills of Nepal and very rarely strayed into the plain forests of Kurseong Division. It was also found in Goalpara forests of Assam across the Sankos river but was never seen in Jalpaiguri district. It was noticed in Cox's Bazar Division and in the southern forests of Chittagong Hill Tracts. It was a protected animal on account of its rarity. I knew of a shikari who only for the credit of shooting a bison amongst his bag, killed a stray bison in Kurseong and paid a fine of five hundred rupees.

The Bison Of Bengdhepa.

Bengdhepa is a forest village in Garjania Range, deep inside the Cox's Bazar forest about five miles south of Bhomariaghona. The best means of getting there in the early nineteen-thirties was by elephant. One fine morning in late November, accompanied by the Range Officer I set out for Bengdhepa. I carried my .350 bore magazine rifle with the odd chance of shooting a barking deer or at best a smaller deer. We arrived there fairly early and spent the morning inspecting the plantations on foot. We left the elephant at Bengdhepa forest village. My rifle was carried by a Forest Guard.

While in the plantation, we were told by the villagers that a Mithun was damaging their jhum every night. We agreed to visit the area after seeing the plantation. It was some distance away from the plantation. I walked up to the place with the Range Officer, the Forest Guard and a villager. While looking at the big hoof marks all over the jhum that was badly browsed, I suddenly heard a snorting

sound from a patch of assamlota. The villager shouted. I looked in his direction and there, barely ten yards away, I saw a big bison bull, of the colour of a buffalo, only showing its head above the assamlota. It came forward a step or two while we all stood stiff on lower ground. It had good horns and the head looked enormous. It seemed to me that its beard almost touched the ground. I could only see its head and no other part of the body. It reminded me of an incident when a Forester was charged by a bison. He rolled on the ground to save himself. This bison looked more ferocious than a tiger. I did not have even a gun to frighten it with. Suddenly it thought better, turned and sauntered away. That was the only bison I ever saw in the forest and I never fancied meeting another.

Deer

Deer of all kinds were found in the Bengal forests. The red barking deer was the most common in every forest. It was seen in the hill forests of the north, in the plains sal forests of Jalpaiguri district, in the Sundarbans, in Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts and in the Sylhet forests. The biggest deer were the sambhar, abundant in Jalpaiguri district, some in Chittagong Hill Tracts, and in Chittagong but rarely in Sylhet. It was never reported from the Sundarbans where the conditions were totally unsuitable for its survival. Hog deer, which is much smaller than the sambhar but bigger than the barking deer was seen mostly in the riverain forests of Jalpaiguri district and sometimes strayed into the sal plantation. The cheetal or spotted deer is still abundant in the Sundarbans. They are seen in small groups under the keora trees through out that forest. In large numbers they are found on the grass patches along the bigger rivers and in big herds on the grass fields on the sea coast at the estuary of the Baleswar river specially at Katka between the estuary of Supoti khal and Betmorgang. Herds can be seen also at the mouth of Selagang, on Dublachar at the estuary of the Passar river and at Nilkamal at the estuary of the Sipsah river. The most common hoof mark on the soft forest floor of the Sundarbans is that of cheetal. They are more numerous in the eastern Sundarbans where the water is less brackish than in the forest west of the Sipsah river. The male cheetal shed their antlers in the summer and the new antlers come in velvet through out the rains when they are not allowed to be shot. Only the stags of all varieties can be shot in the open season while the does are all protected.

1. My First Sambhar.

It was in the very first cold weather of my service in the Forest Department. A colleague of mine and I were doing thinning in young plantations. We noticed lots of damage by deer to the young gamar trees. In some areas every tree was stripped of its bark. My friend decided to have a beat on a Sunday. The labourers who worked with us were quite willing to beat the plantation for a few hours with the hope of getting some venison if a deer was shot. I only had a 12 bore gun and a few L. G. cartridges were the largest size of shots I had. I was a novice; my friend selected a place for me to stand and advised me to put a number 4 cartridge in my right barrel for

murgies and L. G. in the left barrel for deer or pigs. Within a few minutes of the start of the beat, I saw a dark brown animal, the colour and size of a small buffalo, run within ten yards of me. I was standing on a small path and when it ran up to the clear point I saw a beautiful pair of antlers on its head. I fired my L. G. shot just behind its right shoulder and dropped it. I ran up to it myself and saw it was still struggling and fired the number 4 shot on its head from point blank range and it lay quiet. Hearing two shots, my colleague came up to me and was very pleased at my performance. That was the best head of a Sambhar I ever shot.

2. A Sambhar At Raimatong.

Throughout the second World War when Japan joined the war and the Burma front was very hot, my mother-in-law Mrs. A. Majid, stayed on in Shillong. War was raging all along the eastern boundary of Assam. It was after considerable cajoling that I could bring her down from the hill station to spend the cold weather with us in Buxa Division. I was camping at Raimatong. I noticed considerable damage done to young sal plantation by pigs.

My mother-in-law used to tell us stories of sambhar shot in different parts of Assam in her younger days and of bison in the Bijni Raj Estate in Dhubri district. All I could entertain her with were a few jungle murgis. At last I decided to have a beat in the plantation at Raimatong. As luck would have it, a big stag sambhar came out and just as it was running past me, from one plantation to another I put a shot from my '450 double barrelled rifle into its heart and it just lay quiet. An elephant was sent for from Raimatong Forest Rest House to carry the deer. My mother-in-law was very pleased and thought her son-in-law was a great shikari. She even dried bits of venison in the sun and took them with her to Shillong.

3. A Hog Deer At Chilapata.

After the Sundarbans, I was never keen on shooting deer. The best shooting area was in Buxa Division. The shooting Club only allowed two stags per permit per annum and the Forest Officers also abided by that rule. The war supplies made the work very heavy. In every range two years' area was clear-felled and planted up the same year. I never went for deer shooting even for sport. I would shoot jungle murgis with my shot gun and save the rifle cartridges for tiger and even that I shot only one each year.

The protection given to all animals in Hasimara Game Sanctuary increased the number of deer of all varieties and they began to intrude into the adjoining Chilapata forest and damage the young plantations. To keep the local staff and the forest villagers satisfied, occasional beats were held in the plantations and the stags beaten out had to be killed in the interest of protection of the plantations.

Once in February, a beat was held in the Chilapata sal plantations. I stood with my shot gun on a forest road and sincerely wished that nothing bigger than a jungle

murgi would come my way. The Game Warden Mr. A.N. Roy, himself was master of the ceremony and he put me near a dry stream that came out of the plantation. He advised me to load at least one of the barrels of my double barrelled gun with a bullet but I loaded a No. 6 cartridge in one barrel and one L.G. cartridge in the other. A few minutes after the beat started, the beaters shouted out that a deer was being chased out by them. As luck would have it, a pair of hog deer, a stag and a doe came racing along the dry bed of the stream towards me. The doe was leading, she stopped for a minute when she saw me and then leapt forward. I let her pass. The stag got up on the bank of the stream and I killed him with the L.G. shot I had in my gun. That was the only hog deer I ever shot.

4. Cheetal Deer.

In the nineteen twenties the Sundarbans was full of cheetal. Even the coupe purchasers were allowed to shoot them within the coupe without paying for a shooting permit. The idea was to drive the cheetal out of the coupe as they browsed the young seedlings and did considerable damage to natural regeneration of the forest. My first years in the Sundarbans were on working plan duty. At times, I had about two hundred men in a flotilla of boats, most of whom had to work in mud and water from morning till evening. We hardly had more than two meals a day—breakfast and dinner. The subordinate officers were also permitted to shoot deer and enjoy the vension with their men, as an additional incentive for the hard and long hours of work that everybody had to put in. Cold weather was the best time for enumeration work. Friday was a holiday when we used to have boat races and no one got into the forest. The cheetal was generally shot off keora trees when they came to graze on fallen leaves and fruits but hardly anybody could spare the time to sit up on a tree as they were all anxious to get back to their boats as soon as the day's work was finished. Most of the cheetal in the camp were shot from dingy boats. I had a .350 magazine rifle with me which was very effective for the cheetal.

Later in 1929 and 1930 while I was in charge of the Division, I used to spend an occasional afternoon walking along the grass fields near the sea face. Herds of cheetal could be seen and I picked up a few good heads from Katka, Dubla and Nilkamal.

5. Cheetal At Baleswar.

One afternoon, a colleague of mine and I got off the launch on the long grass strip along the western bank of the Baleswar river, about five miles below Supot. We saw a big herd of cheetal. As I had shot many cheetal stags before, I wanted my friend to have the pick of the herd. I posted him near the forest and I, myself, went to the river side to chase the herd towards him. He had a .375 bore magnum rifle and was a good shot. After about half an hour's chase, I heard a shot, he dropped a good stag but it managed to roll into the adjoining forest. Even after the first shot, the herd

did not run away but stood together and began to thump their legs on the ground. He fired again and bowled over a second stag. The whole herd then ran back towards me and away to the sea side—miles to the south. I then heard a third shot and I proceeded towards him.

To my amazement, I found that he had shot a tigress with his third shot within twenty yards of the place from where he got his first deer. When that deer dragged itself into the forest, a pair of tigers caught hold of it and killed it. The herd of cheetal realised that there were tigers in the forest but we were unaware. After killing the second stag, when my friend went to look for the first deer, he saw the stag lying on the ground but two tigers on its two sides flat on the ground with their forelegs outstretched. The herd of deer, after the third shot, knew that both the gun and the tigers were on the forest side and so they ran back towards me. My friend shot the deer but the tigress also laid her claim on it. He fired at her from a range of barely ten yards. The tiger knew better and immediately disappeared into the forest.

6. Barking Deer At Bhomariaghona.

Barking deer is considered a vermin in the forest; of all deer they cause the greatest amount of damage to the young trees by browsing. I shot many barking deer in the forests of Jalpaiguri, Sundarbans and Cox's Bazar. My impression is that the barking deer of the Sundarbans is more red in colour with a beautiful coat in the cold weather. The colour grows dull in the summer.

In Cox's Bazar Division, although I had my .350 bore rifle, I never used it. I only used my shot gun. The most interesting sport was shooting snipe in the paddy fields for an hour a day in the evening after the paddy was harvested. This was a sport to which I was initiated by my Conservator, Mr. Jeston Homphrey, who was my first Divisional Forest Officer when I joined the Forest Service in Jalpaiguri. It was good exercise and good fun as the snipe is a very wily bird and can only be shot on its wings. Cartridges were cheap in those days and one snipe in four shots was considered good.

One afternoon at Bhomariaghona, in the company of my Conservator, we shot about a dozen snipe and most of them fell to my gun. The villagers who were watching the fun came and reported that they had seen a flock of jungle murgis enter a bushy forest in an isolated hillock. We decided to beat that out before retiring for the day. Driven murgis have a peculiar habit of crossing from one cover to another all by one route. My Conservator, who was about thirty yards to my left got two jungle murgis with two shots. Then to my right, I saw a barking deer jumping across the paddy field where we were standing. I had only No. 4 cartridges in my barrels. There was no time to change. I fired and got him nicely on the neck and it tumbled down. I was immensely pleased with my performance that day. Of all the barking deer I shot, the Bhomariaghona one is still most vivid in my memory.

Wild Goats

Only two kinds of wild goats were available in the forests of Bengal, the serow and the gooral. The serow is a small animal about the size of a domestic goat, about three feet high. It is light brown in colour, having a white patch under the chin running down the body up to the tail. It is found in the Tista Valley in Darjeeling below two thousand feet elevation. It was also reported from Chittagong Hill Tracts in Sitalpahar range near Kaptai where it was notified as a protected animal. I once saw a herd in the Tista Valley, high up on a rocky gorge. It was impossible to get within shooting range. Rifle cartridges were so scarce during the Second World War that I did not like to take a chance shot with my rifle. Actually I did not even have the rifle with me in camp. There must have been quite a number of serow in that herd as we counted about a dozen jumping clean across a canyon while we watched from five hundred feet below.

The gooral is a much bigger animal, found in the cold weather in the Tista forests between two thousand and three thousand feet elevation. It comes down from the upper reaches of the Himalayas in the snow season. The colour is deep blue-black, it is about four feet six inches high, with long hair like a goat. It is very smelly and looks like a small cow from a distance.

The Gooral Of Tista.

One cold weather, I was camping at Tista Bridge. The Range Officer of Tista Range was a young Nepali Deputy Ranger. He came and reported that the Forest Guards had noticed the fresh droppings of a gooral and inquired if I would like to try to shoot it. Not having seen a gooral in the forest before, I readily agreed. We had started very early in the morning before the wood-cutters entered the forest and disturbed the animals. We had to ride up-hill about five miles and left the ponies just as the sun was rising. We walked another mile or so over precipitous ground and came to a narrow ridge on the hill where the fresh dung of the gooral was noticed. We tossed a coin and decided which face of the slope I was to watch for the gooral and the other side was for the Range Officer. Two Forest Guards with six villagers went about half a mile away and started to lightly beat the forest.

It was a long wait but I saw a black animal way down on the rock on my side of the ridge. My first impression was that it was a hill cow. It was coming on and then I thought it was a black bear. I only had two L. G. cartridges in my gun and was not at all happy at the prospect of facing a bear with only my shot gun. When it came nearer, I could hear the beat of its hoofs on the rocks and saw it cross the ridge to the side of the Range Officer, about two hundred yards away from me. Within a few minutes, I heard a bang. I waited till the beaters reached us. I then went to the Range Officer's side and saw the gooral lying on the ground. He fired a bullet from his shot gun, hit him behind the shoulder and as it dropped only about ten feet from him, he ran up to it and chopped its neck off with his khukri. The men were pleased, they cut open its stomach and threw away the intestines. Then they tied the four legs, hung the carcass on a pole and four men carried it down on their shoulders to Tista Bridge.

Wild Dog

The wild dog, or Dingo, is found in the Darjeeling hills as well as in Buxa Division in the foot hills of Bhutan. It is reddish-brown in colour, about the size of a pye dog. Except for its behaviour in the forest, one is liable to mistake it for a village dog or even for a barking deer when seen from a distance. It is hardly seen singly, but generally found in packs of three or more. Coming down from Phalut on the border of Nepal, I once met three of them on the road to Palmajua. We had three ponies walking behind us. I was leading and there were six people on the road. At one bend, we suddenly came across three dogs in a pack. I first mistook them for village dogs. The elevation of the place was over eight thousand feet and they were about twenty yards ahead of us. All the three dogs looked so similar that I stopped and remarked on it. Within a few minutes, they left the road and rushed into the mixed forest of oaks and spruce.

The Red Dog At Bhutanghat.

It was in the month of November, the forest roads had just been cleared for motor traffic. My wife had not come down from Shillong and I tried to get round the out-lying parts of Buxa Division before she joined me. I had quite a lot of malaria during the rains that had just past so I had two elephants with me to go round the forests and plantations at Bhutanghat.

One morning, I went out on Shampiari elephant to a distance of about eight miles from Bhutanghat Rest House. I had the shot gun loaded with No. 4 cartridges, just in case I saw a jungle murgi or a flock of imperial pigeons. The mahut was carrying the gun and I was sitting behind him. Going through a sal forest, over undergrowth—mostly of grass, the elephant was stopping again and again. The mahut got suspicious and went further inside the forest when we came upon a pack of red dogs which looked to me like barking deer. Their method of running was very different from the hop of deer and they were in a pack unlike barking deer. The mahut pointed out to me that they were red dogs and handed me the gun. They ran away in front of the elephant and I thought that they had disappeared in the forest. About a hundred yards from that place, we came upon a fallen tree and a single red dog was standing on it and looking back at the approaching elephant. I was barely thirty feet away and fired a No. 4 cartridge killing it instantaneously.

Shampiari, which was the best howdah elephant of the Forest Department, resented sitting down near the dead dog. The mahut climbed down from the elephant and I also shouted to Shampiari to raise her right foreleg for me to stand on it and got off the elephant. I then held Shampiari by her ear while the mahut picked up the dead dog and put it on the saddle. I got up on the elephant by her trunk and the mahut did the same. We saw the rest of the pack run away through the undergrowth. We returned to Bhutanghat with our trophy where the dog was skinned and the skin was sent to Van Ingen and Van Ingen, Mysore, for curing. That was the only Wild Dog I ever shot.