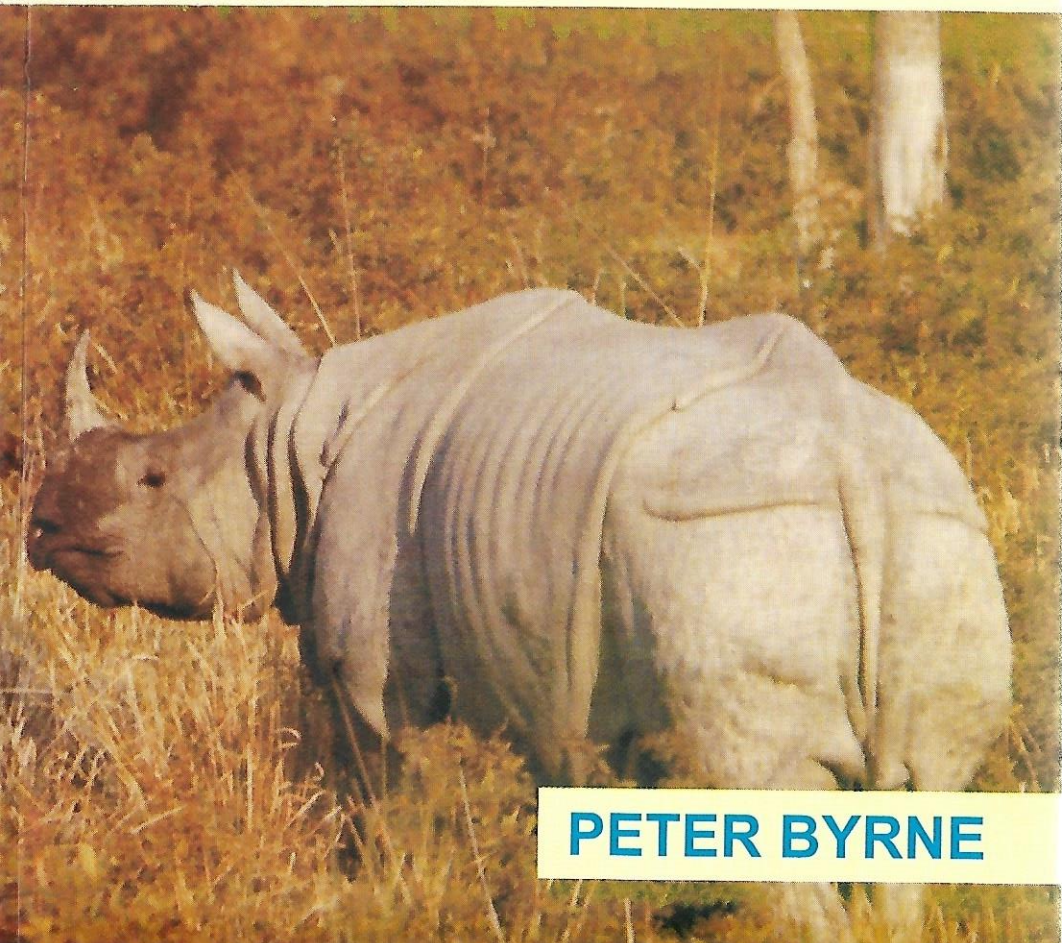
THE WHITE GRASS PLAINS WILDLIFE RESERVE

The Sukila Phanta : The Jewel In The Crown



PETER BYRNE

THE RHINOCEROS

THE GREAT INDIAN ONE-HORNED RHINOCEROS, *Rhinoceros unicornis* (Linnaeus). Taru: *gaira.* Nepalese: *gaida.* Hindi: *gonda or goonda.*

At one time, three species of rhinoceros were found in Asia. These were the Greater Onehorned Indian Rhinoceros, the Asiatic Two-horned Rhinoceros and the Smaller Onehorned, or Javan Rhinoceros. Now there may be only one left.

Until the end of the 1800s, the distribution of the Twohorned species, which, because of its coat of strong, wiry hairs, has also been unofficially known as the Hairy Rhinoceros, ranged from Assam all the way through Burma to Indo-China, Malaysia, Borneo and Sumatra. As of about 1980, it was believed that there were probably no more than twenty or thirty left in the wild. As this figure, from a quarter of a century ago, would be less than the biological minimum needed to sustain the species, it is not unreasonable to presume it is now extinct. The principal reason for its demise, if it is gone, would be poaching, mainly for its horns, but also for nearly all of its other body parts, believed by ignorant indigenous people to have medicinal or even magical powers.

The Javan rhinoceros may well have suffered the same unhappy fate. At 5ft 10in at the shoulder and a little larger than the Twohorned, it once ranged all the way from Bengal to Sumatra.

Again, like the Two-horned, superstition and ignorance and, one would believe, political indifference, has brought about what

may well be the extinction of the species. A survey was carried out in 1960 in the one place where it appeared a few of them were left—the Udjung Kulon Sanctuary, situated at the far western end of Java. The result was a count of about thirty animals. In the time span between 1960 and now, some forty-seven years, it seems doubtful that the species could have survived.

Now, in the new century, we are left with but one species of rhino in Asia. This is the Greater One-horned, a huge animal that is bigger in height and bulk than the African Black Rhino. Males will stand 6ft at the shoulder with a body circumference, behind the withers, of 11ft. The single horn, which is actually not horn at all, but compressed and solidified hair, is usually about 8in in length—an old British record, from Assam, records one of 24in. The animal is solitary, usually meeting only to mate. Females attain sexual maturity in four years and males in seven. The period of gestation is about sixteen months.

Rhinos frequented western Nepal until the turn of the century. Then they were exterminated through hunting and poaching. The last one in the forests of Kanchanpur—the district that contains the WGP—was shot by a British hunter named Drummond, from Tanakpur, in 1910.

In the 1990s, working in the WGP on a conservation project, I came across prints of a lone rhino in the Rani Tal area. The find was reported to the WGP game warden of that time, who stated emphatically that there were no rhinos in the park and that the prints were obviously of something else. I subsequently tracked and photographed a single animal, which, it is believed, must have wandered into the park from the Indian forests of the Pilibhit area, to the south. (Coming from these forests into Nepal must have meant passing through Indian agricultural land, with villages, dogs and people—ignorant peasants to whom all wild creatures mean nothing but food. How the animal survived this without being killed is something of a miracle.)

Later I approached the Nepalese government with a proposal that some additional animals be transferred from Chitwan National Park, where they are plentiful, to the WGP. This was agreed, and in November 2000 six animals, two males and four females, were successfully transferred to the WGP. Since that time two of the females have given birth, bringing the numbers of the present rhino group of the WGP to nine animals. One of the animals that gave birth was the one I had first discovered in the WGP; plans are now (2006) in the works to transfer more.

In the WGP the best places to find rhinos are in the wetlands around Rani Tal, in the Great Swamp—the Andaneha—in the Lal Mutti area, in the Sal Gaudi Tal swamp and also in the dense and almost primeval jungles that lie immediately to the north of Sal Gaudi Tal.

For the amateur naturalist, rhinos are best viewed from elephant-back. One reason is the dense and swampy nature of where they live, terrain that is often very difficult to penetrate and travel through on foot. Another is that the rhino is a short-tempered and cantankerous beast, very easy to provoke and sometimes quite dangerous when disturbed. Females with young are to be avoided at all times, for they will not hesitate to attack a person on foot and will even take on an elephant.

In an attack on a person, they will seldom use the horn, which is essentially a digging tool, but will bite, with sometimes dire consequences for the victim. Some years ago a researcher from Minneapolis, Dave Smith, had the misfortune to unexpectedly encounter one in the Chitwan forests in central Nepal. Walking into the forest in the early morning with his young son, and trailed by a villager, he did not notice a sleeping rhino lying by the side of the trail. The animal woke up and immediately charged. The villager grabbed the boy and ran; the rhino then concentrated its attention on Dave. It bit him, very nastily, thirteen times and only stopped when another rhino appeared, whereupon the two of them walked away together. Dave

survived, but his accident should be viewed as an object lesson for anyone thinking about going on foot into jungle that contains these massive and dangerous animals, especially in WGP.

The animal is extraordinary in appearance, with what looks like armor plate for a hide, with metal rivets holding it together. Being extraordinary, it also naturally follows that it will have some unique habits. One of these is connected with one of its primary natural functions, defecation. When the animal feels a need to defecate, which I understand is once a day and usually in the early evening, it almost always goes to the same place to do this. It continues doing it there until the pile of droppings may reach a height of four feet. A pile this high will eventually become inconvenient and uncomfortable to use, so when it reaches these proportions the animal will start another pile somewhere else. As if that were not odd enough, it compounds the oddity by always approaching its pile backwards, something, sadly, that makes it vulnerable to poachers, who dig a pit under the pile and camouflage it with dung. When the animal falls in, it is quickly and brutally speared to death.

In early 2005 a single female was found dead in the *phantas*, close to the main east-west road, about one and half miles west of the Bauni bridge. An autopsy revealed a seven-month-old fetus and also the fact that the mother's stomach contained a mass of worms, the latter most probably being the cause of her death. In 2006 another female was found dead, of unknown but what appeared to be natural causes. Presently there are between eight and ten rhinos in the WGP, a delightful outcome of my finding of a single animal, the Lone Rhino, as she was called, the first in almost a hundred years in the far west forests.