

NIRALA SERIES

Wildlife in Nepal

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Nirala

CHAPTER ONE

Past Hunting in Nepal

Nepal has always been famous for shikar (big game hunting). During the British rule in India, vice-roys and governors-general with their entourages, at the invitation of the Rana Prime Ministers, would frequently hunt in the Nepal tarai. These hunts were always laid out in a regal fashion and usually resulted in impressive bags of wildlife: tigers, leopards, rhinos, wild boar, crocodiles, and many numbers of chital (spotted deer) and sambar. Bird shooting was also very popular, and scores of partridges, jungle fowl, and peacocks were shot for the table and for sport.

These hunts usually took place during the winter months, and stalking game was next to impossible since the tarai forests were overgrown with tall elephant grasses. Therefore, most shooting was done from elephant back which gave the hunter the advantage of locating game plus afforded him personal safety.

When Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip of the United Kingdom visited Nepal in 1961, a royal hunt was laid out at Megauli, Chitawan District, and some 400 elephants were gathered for the occasion. Although the Queen and Prince Philip did not actively take part in the shoot, Lord Hume and Rear Admiral Bonham Carter bagged a rhino and tiger respectively.

The Queen and her husband were not the only members of British or European Royalty to have hunted in Nepal. In 1870, the Duke of Edinburgh, the second son of Queen Victoria, came for a shoot in farwestern Nepal tarai. In 1876, the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII), shot in same hunting block (from February 16 to March 5), and he bagged 23 tigers, 1 leopard, and several wild boar. Even in those days, the one-horned rhino had been extirpated from the western tarai. Seven tigers were shot in a single day.

In 1911 (from December 16-28), King George V hunted in Sukibhar and Kasra in Chitawan District. The King and suite bagged 39 tigers, 18 rhinos, and 4 sloth bears of which 21 tigers, 8 rhinos, and 1 bear fell to King George's rifle. The record bag for one day was 10 tigers, 1 rhino, and 1 bear.

In 1921, the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII), hunting from Thori Camp in Chitawan, shot 17 tigers, 10 rhinos, 2 leopards, and 2 bears. The better-known U.S. big game hunters who have shot in the jungles of Nepal include: Maurice Stans, the former Secretary of Commerce; Byron Engle, retired Director, office of Public Safety, U.S Agency for International Development. Herb Klein and Toddie Wynne, Jr., wealthy Texan oil magnets; and Big John Coapman, a character unto himself. The late King Mahendra was a keen shikari and a great lover of sport shooting himself.

In 1959, John Coapman opened the first professional hunting company in Nepal. Chalak sleek (smart) as a tiger and ruthless as a leopard, Big John later turned

his efforts to the conservation of wildlife and opened up a tourist lodge, Tiger Tops Hotel, near Megauli in Chitawan. Here tourists could shoot tigers and wildlife with Nikons, Minoltas, and the like. Tiger Tops Hotel has provided a source of hard currency for the government and has yielded insurmountable pleasure and entertainment to tourists and wildlife enthusiasts the world over.

In the past, it was impossible to hunt in Nepal except at the invitation of His Majesty's Government (HMG). But times changed and selected areas were opened to big game hunting all except for rhinos, gaur (bison), and wild buffalo. Big game hunting and poaching has taken their toll of Nepal's natural treasure—its wildlife. Also, with the advent of malaria eradication (1956), starving hill peoples moved into the luxuriant jungles of the tarai, slashing and burning the pristine hardwood forests and turning the grassy expanses under to the plough. Elephant grass was cut for thatch, and illegal timber activities pruned the Sal forests. Today, little of the original Tarai forests remain intact.

The "horn of plenty" has run out. No less than 35 species of mammals are endangered and 15 big game species face possible extinction within the next decade. Already the pygmy hog and wild yak have disappeared and the last report of these two unique animals occurring in Nepal was in the early 1950's. The tiger has been reduced to less than a few hundred in number. Less than 400 rhinos are restricted to the Reu-Rapti Valley. The magnificent black buck antelope

numbers less than 150 in the agricultural land in Bardia. And the wild buffalo, numbering less than 50, is found only in the floodplain of the Sapta Kosi.

Swamp deer, which used to congregate in herds of thousands, are now reduced to small herds frequenting the marshy Shukla Phanta of western Nepal. The late King Mahendra was aware of this alarming rate of disappearance of his country's wildlife, and he instituted a series of national parks and reserves to try to preserve the species.

sport.

Though capturing wild elephants was great sport and venture for daring men like Jang Bahadur, in more recent times, His Majesty's Government (HMG) has acquired the sole monopoly of catching elephants. The government used to organize at least one or two "khedas" annually in order to maintain the Royal herd of elephants. As it is an endangered species, no more capturing or killing is permitted at present.

The Great Asian One-Horned Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) - Gaida

The Great Asian one horned rhinoceros is a large, awkward-looking creature with a big head, short, stumpy limbs, small eyes, and wide nostrils with prehensile lips. It has a single "horn" on the upper surface of the nose which is composed of agglutinated hairs and has no firm attachment to the bones of the skull. The skin which is covered with large convex tubercles, has a number of loose folds, giving the animal the appearance of wearing armour. Contrary to popular belief, rhinos use their sharply pointed lower tusks rather than the horn for defense. The length of the head and body is 2.1-4.2 m, the height at the shoulders 1.3-2.0 m, and the weight 2,000-4,000 kg.

Formerly, the rhino inhabited the grasslands of the entire tarai, but presently it is restricted to an area of about 1,000 sq. km of the Rapti and Reu River Valleys in Chitawan and Nawal Parasi Districts. Preferring swampy ground, they frequent uncultivated alluvial

plains in the Rapti. They are more or less solitary, but several animals may occupy the same tract of dense vegetation. Their diet consists of grasses, reeds, and young shoots, and they are also fond of paddy (rice). The gestation period is approximately 19 months; a single calf is born between February and April. Their life span in the wild may exceed 50 years.

Past surveys have documented the decline of this species in Nepal and only 350 to 400 animals remain. Habitat destruction and poaching have drastically reduced their numbers. Powdered rhino horn is sold as an "aphrodisiac", and a kilogram of horn will bring upwards of \$20,000 U.S. in Hong-Kong and Taiwan.

Poachers take advantage of the rhino's peculiar habit of defecating in the same area. Once poachers discover such a deposit of fresh excreta, they dig a pit in front of the dung heap wide enough to hold a rhino and deep enough to prevent it from scrambling out. Then the poachers prepare a trellis of twigs, branches, and sticks and spread a thin layer of earth over the network. The purpose is to deceive the rhino, which is dull of sight, into believing it is on normal hard ground. When the rhino backs up to defecate on its dung heap as is its usual practice, it crashes into the pit. With the rhino imprisoned, the poachers hack off its horn with an axe, and sometimes they kill the animal for its meat. The pit method is popular among poachers because it does not employ the use of firearms that might alert the forest guards. The usual method of poaching is by shooting but now-a-days poison is also used in baiting (in field).

Ring-shooting was never suited for hunting rhinos because all they had to do was charge the ring to break it in confusion. Elephants, timid in nature, are easily upset by even the sight of small animals such as porcupines—the rhino is "facile princeps". Most elephants flee at the mere glimpse of rhino and hence the staunchest elephants are needed to tackle them.

Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) - Badel

The wild boar is characterized by a long head and a long snout that has a rounded terminal pad for rooting. The first two upper incisors are broad and laterally compressed; the third incisor is small. The canines (tusks) curve outward and upward in both jaws. Record measurements of lower tuskers are 32 cm. (12:5/8 in.) on the outside curve. Large males may weigh in excess of 230 kg. (500 lbs.).

Widely distributed in Nepal, the wild boar ranges from the scanty bush jungle of the tarai, throughout the oak forests in the Midlands, into the alpine meadows of the Highlands. In Langtang Valley, a wild boar was sighted at an altitude of 4,500 m. (14,500 ft.).

Wild boars are generally nocturnal, resting in undergrowth or thickets during the day. They travel in herds of 10-12, and sometimes up to 50 are found together. Omnivorous, they root for roots and tubers, and they do extensive damage to grain crops and fields of potatoes. They have also been known to feed on carrion.

Females have 1-2 litters of 3-8 piglets annually with a reported gestation period of 112-115 days. The piglets