



Government of Bengal

Report of the
Game and Game Fishes
Preservation Committee on the
existing species of Game in
Bengal

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After a few months a well-treated animal is quiet, submissive and kind, and is more or less fully trained. When well treated, they do not appear to grieve over their lost freedom, but enter quietly and contentedly into their new life of bondage and domesticity.

(IX) THE RHINOCEROS IN BENGAL.

15-18

The Asiatic species of rhinoceros.—Several species of rhinoceros survive in the world of to-day, but their present distribution is limited to the tropical regions of Africa and to parts of south-eastern Asia. There are three Asiatic species which are closely related to, but quite distinct from, the several species which are found in Africa.

The remains of five extinct species of rhinoceros have been recorded from the Pliocene and Miocene rock formations of India; these remains probably date back to from 200,000 to 600,000 years ago. The Indian Pleistocene beds, which were laid down 100,000 or 200,000 years ago, have yielded four species of rhinoceros, including remains which have been identified as those of the Great Indian Rhinoceros, which still survives to-day. The rhinoceros is, therefore, a relic of a very ancient form of animal, a form which was once more abundant and widely spread than at the present time.

Until very recently all three forms of the Asiatic rhinoceros were found in Bengal, but now we are reduced to a single species, the Great Indian Rhinoceros, which is found in the sub-montane tract of Jalpaiguri district.

A slightly smaller one-horned species is *Rhinoceros sondaicus*. Less than a century ago this species was common in the Sundarbans, and within living memory a few specimens still survived in the Bengal Duars. Now the species is extinct in both these areas, the last-recorded specimen being shot in Jalpaiguri district about forty years ago. Until very recently a few *Rhinoceros sondaicus* also survived in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and it is just possible that occasional specimens still live in the remote hills at the head-waters of the Rinkheong river. The species is still found in a few places in Assam, and in the forests of Burma, Malaya and the main islands of the Dutch East Indies.

The third Asiatic species of rhinoceros is the Malayan two-horned rhinoceros, *Rhinoceros sumatrensis*. This animal is smaller than any other living species of rhinoceros, and it is also the most hairy. Occasional animals of this species were formerly to be found in the forested hills of Chittagong, and seventy years ago a specimen caught in this area was living in the London Zoo. It is now many years since there was any definite record of its occurrence in Chittagong, but probably the species still survives in the adjacent wild jungles of northern Arakan, and, as in the case of *sondaicus*, it is just possible that odd specimens may still be living in the remote forests on the eastern borders of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The Great Indian Rhinoceros of the Bengal Duars.—The Great Indian Rhinoceros, *R. unicornis*, once common along the foot of the Himalayas from the Punjab eastwards, is now only found in a few places in Nepal, Northern Bengal and Assam. Though this rhinoceros is becoming alarmingly rare everywhere, Nepal and Assam are better off than Bengal, where its habitat is restricted to a few places in the Duars and Cooch Behar State. Here the last main stronghold of the species is a tract of high grass savannah along the Torsa river, stretching from the foot-hills of Bhutan, through the Duars, into Cooch Behar. It is a narrow strip, not more than forty miles from north to south, and at its widest, four miles from east to west—perhaps 50 or 60 square miles. Outside this tract the few scattered colonies

can perhaps muster a dozen individuals in all, but unfortunately these outliers are isolated, and have no adjacent areas of suitable savannah land into which they can expand.

An adult specimen of the Great Indian Rhinoceros stands about 5' to 5' 9" at the shoulder. The length is 9 to 10½ feet, and the barrel has a girth of about 9 feet, and the legs are short, so that the body is extremely heavy and massive. Both sexes carry a single well-developed horn on the nose. The horn of a good male weighs 5 or 6 lbs., and is composed of closely matted hair. It is quite hard and solid, and becomes smooth and polished with use; the horn continues to grow from below throughout the animal's life.

Rhinoceros live to a great age, probably not less than 100 years when unmolested in their native haunts. The female rhinoceros is believed to carry her young for a period of a year or 18 months; a single calf is born.

Habits of the Bengal Rhinoceros.—Although the rhinoceros often wanders many miles into tree forest, his real home is dense grass jungle up to 20' high, which, with a few scattered trees, covers square mile upon square mile of the abandoned beds of Himalayan rivers. Here he grazes most of the night and sleeps most of the day, wallowing in the hot weather in marshy pools with only his head above the mud. He is methodically indolent and sets a wonderfully straight course from mud-hole to grazing ground and from grazing ground to his drinking pools in the clear gravelly streams. The high roads of his tribe do not vary from generation to generation—shady tunnels through the dense towering grass, and deep-worn paths where this thins out under the shade of trees. Contrary to what one hears of African rhino, ours is seldom aggressive, nor does he cause havoc to agricultural crops like the elephant. He is entirely herbivorous and feeds principally on tall jungle reeds and grass.

The other animals that share these haunts with the rhino are mainly grass-jungle game such as the buffalo, swamp-deer, and, where the grass is shorter, the hog-deer together with the ubiquitous tiger, pig, sloth-bear, sambhur and barking deer. The Himalayan bear comes as far south in the hot-weather and the bison, though normally a tree forest animal, enters the tract in search of the new grass which springs up after fires. Leopards frequent the outskirts, but even the heaviest "forest" leopard leaves the heart of this wild tract to his more formidable relation. Wild elephants, though only too plentiful in the surrounding forest, give the rhino and his haunts a wide berth. The rhino does not like elephants, and is apt to get very truculent should one invade his chosen domain.

If my description of the haunt of the rhino has called up visions of an awe-inspiring or even repulsive wilderness of high grass and swamps, peopled with truculent wild beasts, I have failed altogether to do justice to the charm and beauty of the place. To a man on foot, following a rhino path through the denser patches of grass-jungle, it is true that the view is limited to the walls of the tunnel itself, but there are wide stretches of grass that is waist high or even less, and cleared fire-lines traverse the tract. From these, or better still from the back of an elephant, the scenery is really beautiful. The cold weather, that is to say, from October to March, is the best time of year. Then the sky is clear, the air crisp and the sun not too hot or glaring; it is like a perfect summer's day in England. To the north are the blue foot-hills of the Himalayas with the snowy peak of Kanchenjunga in the back-ground, in the fore-ground the greens and yellows of the grass over which stand scattered trees. But the rivers are the greatest charm of all—the great white bed of the Torsa strewn with boulders and many coloured gravels, among which the clear water follows

an erratic course of cascades, rapids and deep green pools. This is the home of the big mahseer while the smaller gravelly streams, in places overhung with trees, hold smaller mahseer and katli and many lesser kinds of fish.

The menace of the Rhino-poacher.—For the last thirty years in Bengal and Assam rhinos have been closed to sportsman, but this has not saved them from poachers, who shoot them to obtain their horns. From time immemorial these have been highly prized for superstitious reasons. A cup made of the horn of a rhinoceros is still believed to render poison innocuous, a point of some importance to tyrannical rulers, and, when powdered, it is held in the East, especially in China, to be the most potent aphrodisiac. It is believed that most of the horns that are smuggled out of these jungles eventually find their way to China but, however this may be, their value in the Calcutta market is about half their weight in gold. A single horn, retrieved from the poachers, ten years ago fetched Rs. 2,000 and still higher prices have been known. That an animal by nature condemned to carry such a price on its nose should tempt poachers is not to be wondered at, but the remoteness of their strongholds and their armour, too thick to be penetrated by "gas-pipe" guns, was their protection and up to some 15 years ago there were probably about two hundred animals living in the small tract I have described.

Then poaching began. The first poachers came from Assam, where they had plied the same trade, and brought with them muzzle-loading guns heavy enough to kill a rhino. They were joined by local men of the same tribe (Mechs) and formed themselves into gangs. Their plan was to build a light *machan* about eight feet above the ground at strategic points, usually where two well-worn rhino tracks met, and lie up when the moon was nearly full. Sooner or later a victim was bound to pass by and received a heavy bullet at a range of a few feet. It would usually charge off and the poachers, waiting for day-light, had an easy blood-trail to follow. They seldom took more than the horn; to try to dispose of the meat, which by the way is excellent eating, would have aroused suspicion and the organisers, wealthy men who kept well in the back-ground, probably forbade their gangs to sell it. For some years this went on without any suspicion being aroused,—not a record of which the Forest Department can feel proud perhaps, but on the other hand, detection was none too easy. To begin with rhino-country is of no great commercial value as compared with timber forest and not more than two or three ill-paid Forest Guards could be spared to patrol a tract which produced so little revenue. Rhino-poaching was a paying business and could afford to pay hush-money if necessary or, if that failed, a Forest Guard could disappear as easily as a rhino in that matted tangle of high-grass. It may be thought that a form of poaching which involves the letting off of at least one heavy charge from a gun for each animal killed and of leaving the huge carcases at the scene of the crime, ought not to be difficult to detect. It must, however, be remembered that the tract in which the rhinos live is a narrow strip surrounded on all sides by cultivated land in which the villagers possess innumerable guns for the protection of their crops from deer and pig, and that a mortally wounded rhino is not normally going out into the open to die. A tunnel in fifteen-foot grass is almost as effective as a grave, for vultures work by sight alone. I have said that a rhino will not normally go out into the open to die; as a matter of fact it was an exception to this rule that first awakened us to the state of affairs in 1931.

Once the poaching had been detected the Forest Department took immediate steps, but this is not to say that the poaching stopped. It continued for at least another six months, for the poachers and their financial

supporters were not going to drop a good thing so easily and shots were exchanged on both sides and arrests made and prosecutions instituted before the evil ceased, I wish I could say finally but I am not such an optimist. The moment the pressure is taken off it is bound to crop up again, the organisation and the markets are still there, and the poachers are only biding their time.

The Torsa Rhinoceros Sanctuary.—The main portion of the Torsa river rhinoceros country was constituted into a Game Reserve, for the protection of rhino, in 1932. The provisional scheme drawn up was endorsed by Government, who also voted funds to provide for a suitable staff of guards to patrol the sanctuary. A systematic search, conducted throughout the Torsa jungles, immediately after the area had been made into a sanctuary, led to the discovery of the remains of between forty and fifty skeletons of rhinos which had perished by the guns of poachers during the preceding few years. At the same time a rough census was made of the existing stock of rhino; the living animals were estimated to muster not more than between forty and fifty individuals, an alarmingly low figure. Since that time the area has been continuously patrolled and carefully watched, and the rhino-poachers have been given a very thin time. Protection has been successful, very few animals have been lost since the sanctuary came into existence, and the sadly depleted stock of rhinoceros is slowly building up again in the peace and security of the sanctuary. The many other species of wild game which frequent the Torsa jungles, have also benefited from the protection afforded to them, and the Torsa Game Sanctuary has now abundant stocks of all the most interesting wild animals that are found in Bengal. In maintaining this sanctuary, and preserving the Great Indian Rhinoceros, and other valuable and interesting big game animals, from the threatened danger of extinction, Bengal is doing a great service to posterity, not only for her own people, but also for the whole of India, and indeed for the whole of the world.

Legislation for the protection of rhinoceros.—As soon as the full extent of the danger from rhinoceros-poachers was appreciated, it was realized that the existing law was inadequate to deal with the menace. The Bengal Legislature accordingly passed a special Act to provide for the preservation of rhinoceros in Bengal. This Act was passed in 1932, and quickly led to several convictions which would not have been possible under the old rules. The Bengal Rhinoceros Preservation Act is an essential part of the successful drive to preserve rhinoceros in Bengal.

The Government of India have also assisted, and have recently passed rules which prohibit the export from or import of rhinoceros horns, and all parts of rhinoceros, into British India, except under special licence.

(X) BISON AND BUFFALO.

Few people need to be told the difference between the Bison and the Buffalo. The most characteristic distinction is in the horns which in the bison are comparatively short, a good average horn measuring about 27 inches, while buffalos have been known to bear horns of over 6 feet in length. The body colour of the buffalo, as soon as it reaches maturity, is slaty black, while young bison bulls and all cows, when they are adult, are deep reddish brown or coffee-coloured and it is only when the bull grows old that he turns black; even then his almost hairless skin is quite different from that of the buffalo which is always more or less hairy.

At one time it was believed that there are two distinct species of wild bison, the more common one being known as the *gaur* or *gauri gai*, while

the animal found exclusively in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the neighbouring Assam hills is called the *mithun* or *gayal*. It has now been established that the latter is a cross between the *gaur* and domestic cattle, kept tame by the tribes of that area and being of no small importance in their standards of wealth. The few that are reported to have been shot in a wild state must have escaped from domestication and run wild. It is said that at the fourth generation of crossing the true *mithun* type is produced varying from the *gaur* by the absence of the typical arched ridge between the horns of the latter and usually having a well-developed dewlap. The horns of the *mithun* turn slightly upwards but have not the inward half-moon curve which those of the *gaur* always have. The *gaur* is found in Bengal in the sub-Himalayan forests and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the areas adjoining them. It is nowhere numerous and is protected with considerable strictness, though for part of the year males may be shot in the Chittagong forests. The Buffalo was at one time common in the great grass jungles which spread through Bengal from the Himalayas to Midnapore, but with the spread of cultivation it has become a very rare animal and is rightly entirely protected throughout the province. The so-called wild buffalos of Kukri Mukri island off the coast of Bakarganj district were tame animals run wild when the place was deserted by settlers; more than one distinguished sportsman has returned from the island with a buffalo trophy.

(XI) SEROW AND CORAL.

Of the wild sheep and goats such as the bharal, the ibex, and the markhor, which are the prizes of mountain *shikar*, we have none in Bengal, but we have two representatives of the goat-antelopes which, as their name indicates, are believed to be intermediate between goats and antelopes. These are the Serow and the Goral. They are easily recognized by their short unbranched conical horns curving somewhat backward, and reaching a length of about 10 inches in the serow and usually 6 or 7 in the goral. The serow, when full grown, stands about 36 inches in height at the shoulder, while the corresponding measurement of the goral is about 26 inches.

The serow is found on the slopes of the Himalayas from about 10,000 feet elevation down to approximately 4,000 feet; it prefers to live in heavily wooded gorges but sometimes emerges in the morning and the evening and is a conspicuous figure on a rock or a grassy slope with its dark coloured heavily built body and the lighter colour (in our race) of the lower part of its limbs. It is found in the Lushai and Burmese hills and might be expected to occur in the higher hills of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, but no records of its occurrence there are apparently available.

The goral, perhaps owing to its size and its habit of frequenting the most precipitous mountain slopes, is often called the Himalayan chamois but has really little in common with the chamois externally, as it differs in the shape of its horns, its colour, and in the marked shagginess of its coat. It is found in our area only on the slopes of the Himalayas at elevations between about 3,000 and 9,000 feet. Our race is known from its colour as the brown goral differing in this respect from the grey goral of the western Himalayas, and from the Burmese goral by its smaller tail and a slight but constant difference in the position of a stripe on its foreleg which in our goral passes over the knee but in the Burmese goral turns aside and runs down the outer side of the leg below the knee ending at the back of the fetlock.