

# Indian Wildlife





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## Eastern India

Rhinos of Kaziranga

Manas Wildlife Sanctuary

Thamin Deer of Floating Island

Starved Man-eaters  
of Sundarbans

## Rhinos of Kaziranga

To the naturalist and wildlife lover, Assam presents many an attraction. This land of rain-soaked, fertile soil is famous for its unique flora and fauna in its sanctuaries. The only ape in India, the hoolock gibbon is found only in Assam. Among other specialities of Assam are the capped langur or leaf monkey [*Presbytis pileatus* (Blyth)], the golden langur [*Presbytis geei* (Khajuria)], the slow loris [*Nycticebus coucang* (Boddaert)], and the hog-badger (*Arctonyx collaris* F. Cuvier). The clouded leopard [*Neofelis nebulosa* (Griffith)], the golden cat (*Felis temmincki* Vigors & Horsfield), the binturong [*Arctictis binturong* (Raffles)], the pigmy hog [*Sus salvanius* (Hodgson)] and the hispid hare [*Caprolagus hispidus* (Pearson)] are also found only in Assam.

The Kaziranga National Park and seven other sanctuaries of Assam have about 1,300 rhinoceroses, 300 tigers, 1,900 wild elephants and 1,000 wild buffaloes. It has been revealed in a report published in 1981 that according to a preliminary estimate, there were 7,200 wild elephants in the north-eastern states. Their statewise population was: Arunachal Pradesh, 200; Assam, 1,900; Meghalaya, 2,500; Manipur, 150; Tripura, 150; Nagaland, 250; Mizoram, 250.

The avifauna of Assam is also remarkable. Around 1905, the white-winged wood duck [*Cairina scutulata* (S. Muller)] was well distributed over the major portion of the Brahmaputra valley, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram. In just 50 years, its number declined drastically, and its habitat shrank considerably. It is now restricted to only north-eastern Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The Assam Valley Wildlife Society estimated that there were only 44 white-winged wood ducks that survived in 1979 in the whole of Assam. In 1969 this bird was bred in captivity at Slimbridge in the United Kingdom; in 1977 at Bardubi Tea Estate of Dibrugarh, Assam; and, recently at the Gauhati zoo. It may be possible to rehabilitate the young duck bred in

*A single horn and thickly folded skin give an armoured look to the great Indian rhinoceros. The mother guards the resting calf. Overleaf: A large bull enjoys its wallow.*





captivity in their natural habitat. The main identifying feature of the bird is the white patch on its wing coverts.

There are many pools and shallow lakes in the swamps of Assam. A variety of aquatic vegetation such as water lily, lotus, water hyacinth grow on the muddy beds of these lakes, and the shores are covered with reeds and grasses. Such green lakes are peculiar to Assam, which attract thousands of birds. At the Kaziranga National Park about a hundred different species of birds may be seen. The breeding of pelicans near Kaziranga village is an interesting feature of this park.

According to the March 1978 census, there were about 931 rhinos, 773 elephants and 610 wild buffaloes in the park; the other species included 22 gaurs, 390 sambar, 700 barasingas, 7,032 hog deer, 300 barking deer, 700 wild boars, 47 bears, 50 tigers, 20 leopards and about 300 otters.

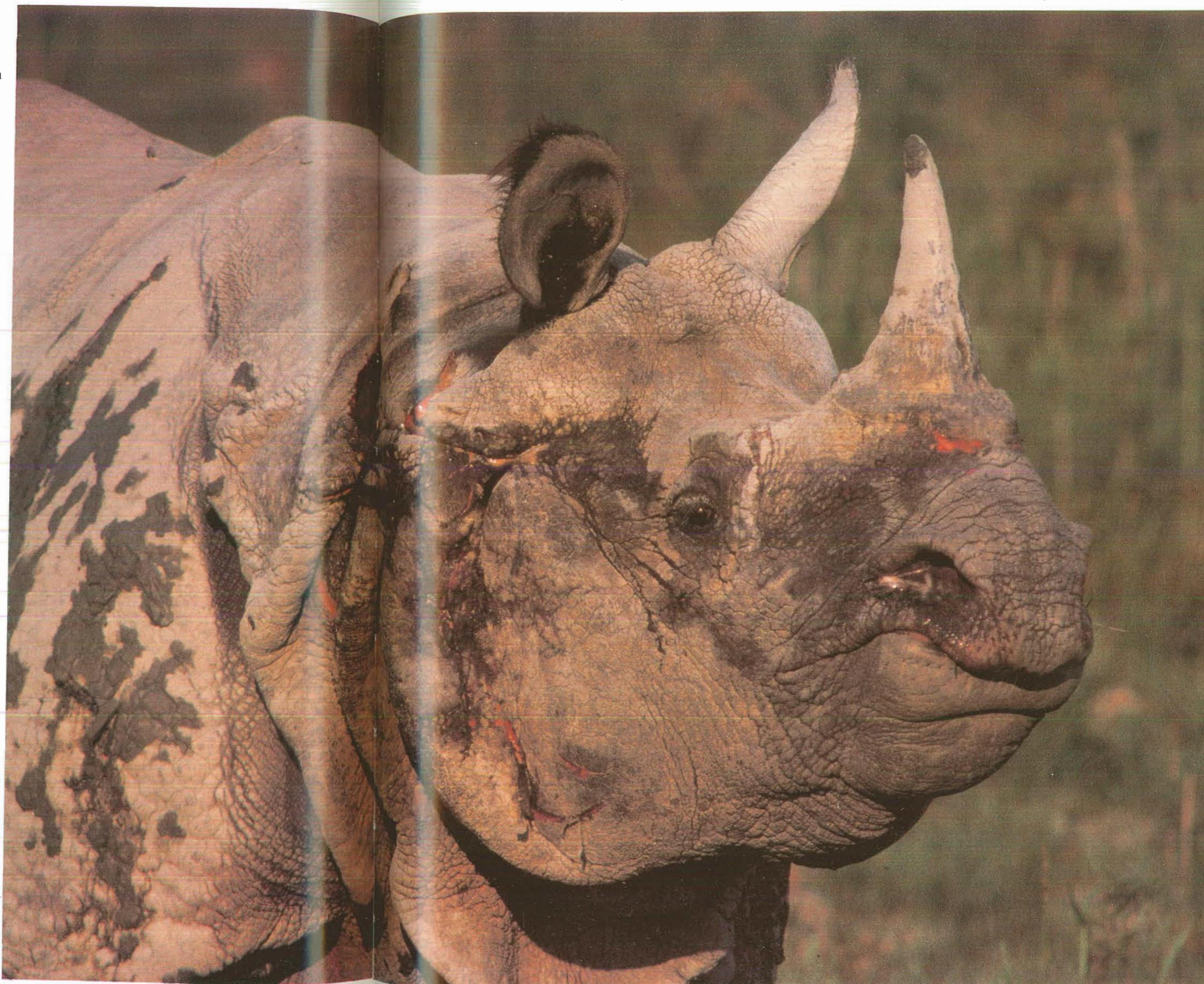
Each summer, the flood waters of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries submerge a substantial portion of the park. At least two-thirds of the park remain under water between June and September, compelling rhinos and many other wild animals to take refuge in the highlands of Mikir hills, where they are not well protected. In the 1980 floods nine rhinos lost their lives, and 10 more died of illness.

A fully grown great Indian one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis* Linnaeus), weighs up to 2,000 kilograms. It is limited in its distribution to the low marshlands on the banks of the Brahmaputra, the nether land of the Himalayas, in a small area in Bengal and the low *tarai* lands along the rivers Rapti and Narayani in western-central Nepal. Centuries ago, thousands of these animals inhabited the marsh along the rivers between Sind and Burma.

Atop the rhino's snout protrudes a horn which is, in fact, composed of a closely matted mass of horny fibres. Interestingly, it is not used as a weapon by the rhino—it attacks with its tusks. The elephant normally avoids the rhino for fear of its soft trunk being injured.

While photographing and studying wildlife in Kaziranga, we came across a number of injured and disabled rhinos; the rhino population in the marshy lands of the park is very high, and the 430 square kilometres of land cannot contain more than 500 rhinos. They, therefore, have to fight for grazing grounds. Since extension of the park does not seem to be feasible, the problem can be solved by translocating them to the forests of the Jaldapada sanctuary, the Dudhawa National Park and the Corbett National Park. In the past, the

*An injured and disabled rhino. A number of rhinos get injured in fights over a mate.*



rhino was also found in the *tarai*. The last rhino in Uttar Pradesh was killed near Pilibhit at the beginning of this century.

Since ancient times the horn of the rhino has been believed to represent the *linga*, the male sexual organ. It is used in the preparation of aphrodisiacs. The extreme rarity of the horn has escalated its price to such an extent that poachers kill it just for its horn. They naturally try to sell it as quickly as possible.

Within the state a horn may sell for Rs. 10,000. When it reaches the connoisseurs in far-eastern countries, it may sell for an unbelievable price of Rs. 50,000 per kilogram. In recent years there has been a spurt to smuggle it to west Asian and south Asian countries, where a horn may fetch as much as Rs. 150,000.

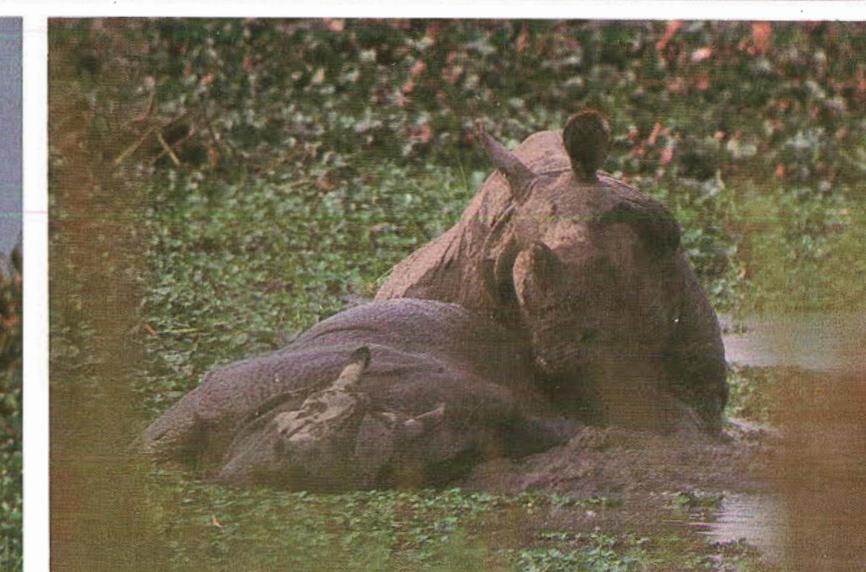
In a report of the World Wildlife Fund and the International Union for Conservation of Natural Resources published in 1981, Dr. Osmond Bradley Martin—after carrying out a study on rhino horn trade in India and Africa—observed that illegal traffic in the horn of the Assam rhino continues unchecked all over the country. It fetches a price as high as Rs. 62,400 per kilogram. Not surprisingly, more people have now been lured into rhino poaching.

In days gone by, the rhino was hunted by princes as big game. Its skin was used for making shields for warriors. One of the Ranas of Nepal is said to have shot 97 rhinos in a month.

At the turn of the century the rhino's numbers declined sharply. It is estimated that about a dozen rhinos were left in Kaziranga in 1904; in Bengal their numbers were even less. Hunting the rhino was completely banned in 1910, and the Army was pressed into service to discourage poaching. These measures were so effective that the number of rhinos increased steadily. It is estimated that there are now about 1,654 rhinos in Kaziranga, Jaldapada and Manas. In 1978 the Kaziranga National Park was adjudged the best sanctuary in India and—quite deservedly—it was awarded a prize by the chairman of the Indian Wildlife Board.

Though the Bengal Rhinoceros Act, 1932, and the Assam Rhinoceros Bill, 1954, were enacted to protect the rhinoceros, poachers in Assam and Bengal could not be controlled, and poaching is still a major problem. In 1975, high-frequency walkie-talkie sets were made available to the park to check the movements of poachers. Armed guards and patrol parties in Kaziranga and Manas now keep a round-the-clock vigil to curb poaching activities.

In spite of that poachers killed seven rhinos in the first four months of 1981. Two rhinos were



Top: A bull rushes out of the water to charge the photographer after it had smelled him. Left and above: Rare pictures of rhino copulation in the marshes.

Overleaf: A large herd of male barasingas with their velvet antlers posing for the camera.

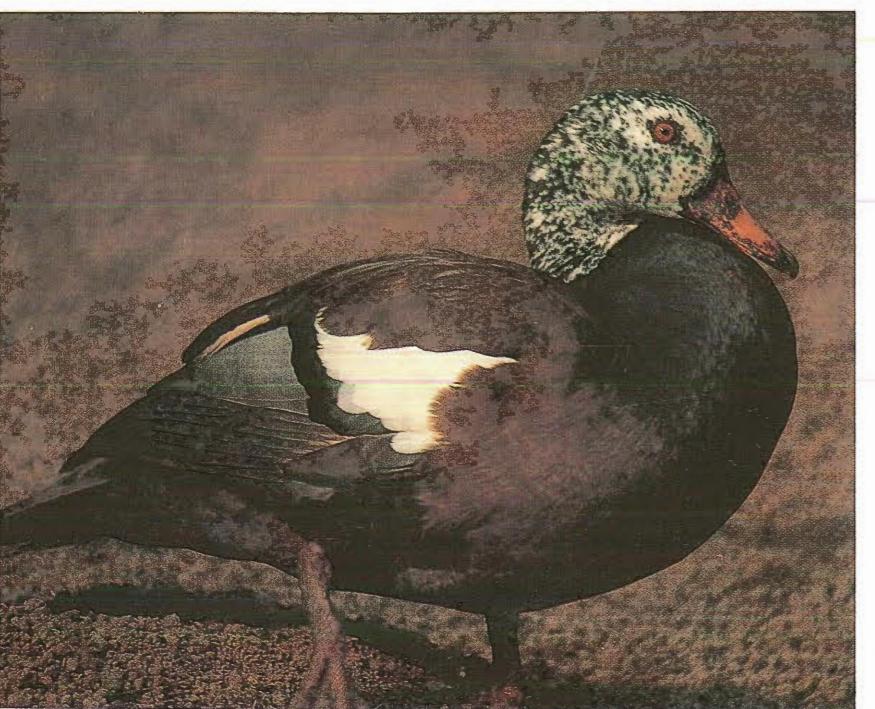


killed in February 1980 in Jaldapara. In January 1982, these unscrupulous people disposed of 21 rhinos in Kaziranga—a record in the history of Kaziranga sanctuary. Even other animals are not safe in the forests of Assam and Bengal. Almost every fourth or fifth day a tiger or leopard or snake is killed and their skin sold off in Calcutta. About 15 poachers in Jaldapara and about 20 in Kaziranga are said to be working for four or five foreign smuggling chains.

Known as the hoolock gibbon, the tailless ape is found in the hill forests of Assam and Chittagong and the states of North Shan and Yunnan in Burma. It has white brows and is, therefore, also called the white-browed gibbon—Latin name, *Hylobates hoolock* (Harlan).

Six to eight kilograms in weight, about 90 centimetres tall and slimly built, this ape has a round head and unusually long arms, which may be twice the length of its hind legs. Its snout is short with nostrils set far apart. The male and the young female are dark in colour. When the female is five to six years old, its colour becomes pale brown. Infants have pale-brown hair with a yellowish tinge all over body.

The mother, father and their offspring live in small troupes, the number seldom exceeds six. These family groups eke out territories to live in.



Above: The white-winged wood duck—a white patch on the wing coverts is the diagnostic of the species. Right: The hoolock gibbon, a tail-less primate with small and round head and very long arms found in the forested areas of eastern India.

Other troupes also stay in forests that have adequate food.

Diurnal in habits, the hoolock gibbon is most active in the morning and evening. Its food consists of leaves, twigs, fruits, flowers, insects, larvae and spiders. It drinks dew from the leaves, either sipping it or using its palm.

A hoolock family usually spends the night in a densely forested canyon and, at dawn, moves up to the top of the hill. There, they bask in the sun and forage high up in the trees. Each family hunts for food within its own territory, moving through the same tree tops every day. The members of the family may take different trails, creating a network of arboreal routes, just as grazing cattle leave a network of trails on the ground. The track over which it has passed is marked by broken twigs.

As soon as the morning light permeates into the forest, hoolock gibbons create a bedlam. One of them starts, and the calls are taken up by the whole family. Like a contagious disease, this chorus spreads to the other family groups, and soon the forest resounds with the uproar.

During the hottest hours of the day the hoolock moves into the dense woodlands to rest. In the evening it again comes out in search of food but there is less noise. Swinging through the branches by its long arms, walking upright on stout branches, dropping down to reach a lower branch, the hoolock appears to be more agile than any other ape in the same weight-class. While walking upright it balances itself by spreading out its arms.

It is monogamous, and mates in the beginning of the rainy season. The young are usually born between December and March. Mothers jealously protect their young. Moving through trees, they carry them piggyback over the obstacles and, while leaping from one tree to another, hold them tight against their breast with one arm.

The hoolock is commonly seen in zoos calling noisily. Children enjoy teasing it. They mimick its calls and it starts calling back even louder . . . whoopooo! . . . whoopooo! This cute animal is easy to tame and many people keep it as a pet. When brought up as a pet the hoolock does not need to be kept in a cage. It stays on the trees in the compound and often comes to the owner, expresses its affection and entertains him!

Some wild tribes hunt it for food. They also ensnare it alive for selling. The hoolock population is dwindling rapidly because of decimation at the hands of tribals and the destruction of the virgin forests, its habitat. According to a 1971-72 estimate, there were 78,700 hoolocks in Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram. The figure seems to be exaggerated.

