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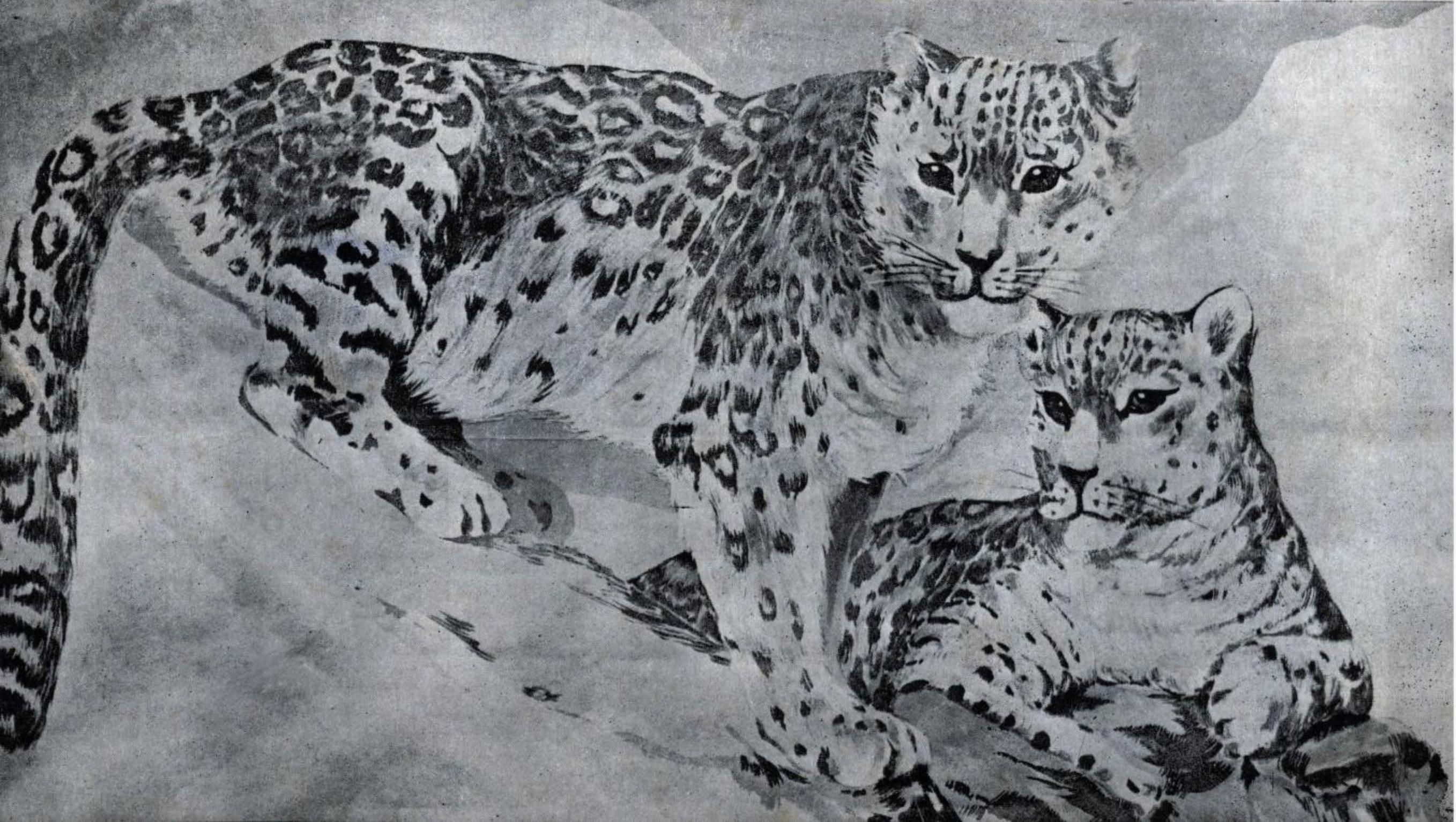
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A Profile of Kaziranga

By

HAMDI BEY

Kaziranga's face, like any other, has two sides—the one at which the conservationists toil and the other which visitors enjoy.

Dr. Juan Spillett (a contributor to this journal) who conducted last year's census thinks "as far as wild life is concerned, Kaziranga is about the only bright spot that I have encountered in all of India". In a letter to me he observed that the census had found "about half again as many rhino than many had estimated, and that the place was loaded with elephant and as a whole almost all the wild life populations appeared to be in very good shape".

None has come back from Kaziranga disappointed though the usual tourist itinerary gives the sanctuary very little time. Most visitors come by air to Jorhat and then travel down NH 37 by taxi, just 55 miles, spend the night at the Kohora tourist lodge, go on elephant back for 2½ hours into the sanctuary, and then motor back to Jorhat to take a plane away from it all. Still the tally is always impressive—several rhino, swamp deer, hog deer, buffalo, pig, sometimes elephant—all seen in a few hours on the edges of the sanctuary.

Very few visitors spend two nights and explore the more distant bheels; fewer still watch pelicans nesting and rarely does a visitor take an elephant for a whole day to track down the big elephant herd or a boat to travel down the Brahmaputra and see darters standing in rows on the banks for long stretches.

Actually most visitors spend less time in the sanctuary than they do on a visit to a big zoo. Yet some of them have reported having seen tigers, monitor lizards and a python catch a teal. The rainy months, when the sanctuary is in flood, are becoming increasingly popular with visitors who want to see wild life without much trouble for then the animals are around the tourist lodges.

Apart from the facility and certainty with which wild life is seen at Kaziranga is the fact of its accessibility, and these two bring to it over 5,500 visitors each year of whom 500 are from other countries.

The main tourist lodges, those at Kohora, are beautifully sited, up on a hill with a rocky stream coursing by, and overlooking a tea-garden and the sanctuary. A 15-minute drive along a motorable kutchra road takes one to the Mihimukh watch-tower where some animals are to be seen every day and at any time of the day. Beyond the watch-tower the road

goes to the Arimora lodge within the sanctuary, and on the way one sees rhino definitely; buffalo and swamp deer generally and elephant occasionally. Six miles from Kohora along the National Highway is the Baguri lodge, whose backyard is part of the sanctuary, and whence the more exciting beels are reached as well as the tree-top house. Since there is no motorable road to the tree-top house it is not as popular with visitors as the watch-tower.

The existing accommodation at the two Kohora tourist lodges can take in 3,000 more visitors each year, while there is room for overflows at Baguri and Arimora and at the closeby inspection bungalows of Amguri, Kaziranga and Bokakhat. The grounds at Kohora have been steadily improved and are both pleasant and restful. Nice walks can be taken to tribal villages behind the lodges particularly to a huge boulder which has been shaped into the likeness of an elephant by unknown tribal artists. The significance of the sculpture is not known.

The Kohora lodges have electricity and soon will be having airconditioned rooms, running hot water and water-coolers. They have modern bathrooms with tubs and showers. There is a planter's club 15 miles away where visitors can play tennis or golf, have a beer and chat with locals. A petrol pump is under installation just below the tourist lodges.

Most of these amenities have grown because of the wild animals of the sanctuary, and so we must now turn to the stock there. A detailed list of the animals and birds will take a lot of space and probably it will suffice here to say that last year there were 366 rhino, 150 elephant, 101 swamp deer, about 100 buffalo and thousands of hog deer and pig. The population of day feeders is large and that is why visitors see so many animals.

The natural history of Kaziranga has not yet been worked out in detail. The sanctuary is a gift of three rivers—more so of the Difloo and the Dhansiri than of the Brahmaputra into which they fall. Old and abandoned courses of these rivers lie all over the 166 square miles of the sanctuary, and are recognizable by the beels which still retain water because of the annual inundation. The tributaries brought rich loams, free from lime but acidic in reaction (the pH value being between 5.2 and 5.5) to a valley to which the Brahmaputra had given only neutral soil.

Less than 200 feet above mean sea level and lying south of 27 degrees N Latitude the temperature rarely falls below 40 degrees F. Frost is unknown and even in June and July, when it is hottest, the shade temperature never goes up beyond 90 degrees F. Though the monsoon extends from May to September there are sharp but brief showers from March onwards. Rain totals 83 inches and rain days total 119 in the year.

The climate and soil were ideal for a tropical forest but the sanctuary is a grassland interspersed with marshes. The rivers and their changing courses retarded tree growth initially, and away from the swampy areas are the strips of mounds built by earthworms on

which alone trees grow. These narrow woodlands are damp and moist, nurturing cane brakes, and among these the pelicans nest and the sambar have their clean herd-floors as though swept by brooms.

Elsewhere grasses and weeds inhibit tree-growth for the trees, siris and simul, are light foliaged and leafless during spring. The grasses and weeds are prone to fire, and each year they are set on fire purposely to keep the sanctuary open enough for rhino to live.

The water spreads of the beels are often covered by water hyacinth which the larger animals eat to a limited extent, but their main food is alongside the marshes where the doloni creeper, the ikra and nal reeds, and the doob grass grow. Rhino, elephant, and buffalo prefer the doloni, ikra and nal but the deer are partial to doob. There is much thatch and other rough grasses eaten by all and frequented by florican, partridge and kaleej. The beels are fishful and support the pelicans, storks, cranes, egrets and darters.

When notification 37-F of January 3, 1908, constituting Kaziranga was issued only a dozen rhino had been left after much shooting there for half a century. Supposing half of that initial stock were males there should have been six Founding Fathers of the sanctuary. Three of them have been identified: Boora Goonda, Kankatta and the one who died this year after a week's refuge (from younger bulls) in the Vesalimara fringing, too soon to earn a nickname.

The main problem in conservation has been poaching because of the high price rhino horn fetches, over Rs. 7,000 per kg. The sanctuary has 77 miles of boundaries of which 36 are along rivers. The next threat is from infection from cattle which graze around the sanctuary and in areas within it. In 1950 mass inoculation of the livestock of the surrounding villages was carried out by volunteers. The time is ripe for a second drive in that direction. Erosion and flooding during the monsoon drive the animals into the hills where they are not protected. The mithun population has declined to such a low figure that mithun (gaur) have not been seen for years because of these migrations. The sanctuary needs addition of some hill areas to it and a wider buffer zone to the south.

After being merely a Reserve (one is not sure if during those years there were not blocks for shooting animals other than rhino) for 18 years, Kaziranga became a sanctuary in 1926. The animal population rapidly expanded after that but efforts to constitute it into a National Park have not yet borne fruit. Incidentally the Wild Life Board, which normally chooses a sanctuary for its meetings, has not since its inception in 1952 held a meeting at Kaziranga or in Assam.

So far conservation at Kaziranga has been a job of policing the sanctuary against poachers, and that has been successfully done to give a net annual increase in rhino population over the last 60 years of six. This rate of increase has not yet been correlated to the annual

mortality (both natural and artificial) recorded at the Range Office, and so the birth rate is not known either. But we know that the gestation period among rhino is prolonged, 16 months, and that mating is rather fortuitous because both male and female must come in heat at the same time. The female periodicity is fairly regular 46 to 48 days, but males at zoos have been known to be unresponsive unless fed with special hormones in their diet.

The sex ratio among the rhino of Kaziranga has not yet been ascertained. It is difficult to tell a male from a female rhino though some of the staff at Kaziranga maintain that shapes of the respective necks differ, especially in thickness. Others think the female horn is smaller. Dr. George Schaller had suggested that the outline of horns picked up from dead animals, whose sex can be definitely known, should be traced on paper and possibly after a hundred horns had been so studied it would be possible to identify the sex of free and live rhino by the look of their horns. This scientific work, which is in addition to the strenuous policing against poachers, can only be done if special funds and staff are made available.

Report on Drought Relief Work in the Palamau Forests of Bihar

By
ANNE WRIGHT

We have been visiting the beautiful jungles of Palamau for the last fifteen years on shooting holidays but our interest in the shooting part of these holidays waned as we became interested in the preservation of the wild life, fast disappearing from this lovely region.

For two consecutive years the monsoon rains have failed in the area with the resultant loss of crops— a grim tragedy for the villagers who now face starvation, and to add to the distress the water level in all Bihar had gone down. On a visit in January of this year it was already clear that the shortage of water due to the unprecedented drought was going to affect the wild animals very seriously. I wrote to the World Wild Life Fund who replied that they had not at that time any arrangements for the disposal of emergency funds, and that a grant would take time, which of course we could not afford. They however very kindly circulated the letter and the International Society for the Protection of Animals wrote to say that a sum of £500 was being donated by the R.S.P.C.A. to the Animal Welfare Board, Madras. This