

GAME SANCTUARIES AND NATIONAL PARKS IN WEST BENGAL

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Much of the wild life in this State, as elsewhere in India, is fading away—either due to the wanton destruction of the forests inhabited by game or due to their unrestricted slaughter by man. This has particularly been so in areas where there is no control of the State Forest Department.

Preservation of *all* wild life even on religious grounds, if any, can serve no useful purpose, as human interests must prevail whenever these are in conflict with the former. All right-thinking men have now realised the need of orderly and selective protection or preservation of wild birds and animals, as none will favour their total extermination nor their unchecked multiplication. A few examples of how some species have been extinct, or are on the verge of extinction will not be out of place here. *Rhinoceros sondaicus* the hornless rhino, which was once common in the tidal forests of the Sundarbans became totally extinct in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. In the grassy areas, interspersed with *hijal* trees (*Barringtonia acutangula*) in the district of Malda, Florican (*Sypheotides indica*), the well known game bird, was quite common even as recently as 1934–35, but due to ceaseless hunting by man on the one hand and depredations caused by the fearsome grey jungle-cat on the other, this bird has now become rare. The swamp deer (*Cervus duvauceli*) a graceful antelope, commonly known as “Barasinga”, meaning a 12-pointer, exists now in small numbers only in the Game Sanctuary in a riverain forest (*Jaldapara*) in the western part of the Buxa Forest Division. Had the Jaldapara forest not been constituted a game reserve some twenty years ago, this antelope, as well as the one-horned rhinoceros, *Rhinoceros unicornis*, would possibly have by now ceased to exist in this State.

Apart from being a national asset, wild life has a very high place in sport and æsthetics. How many thousands of men, women and children flock daily to the Alipore Zoological Gardens. They do not see wild life in nature but they see it in captivity. Even then they go there many a time for pleasure and recreation.

At the rate at which population of West Bengal is increasing with the influx of displaced persons from East Pakistan, and consequently with the necessity for opening up more areas that have remained secluded so far, it is not difficult to foresee a time in the not-so-distant future, when large parts of this State will be devoid of the wild life that now exists therein. The opening up of remoter areas to accommodate the increasing population, the construction of new roads, and the large increase in the number of motor cars, etc., will considerably help poachers and thoughtless hunters to intensify their work of destruction of game. Protection and preservation of wild life in West Bengal is, therefore, a problem, that demands serious attention of all lovers of nature. It is most essential that there should be some legislation in this respect. The existing Wild Birds and Animals Protection Act, 1912, is hardly of any help in protecting wild life outside the Reserved Forests, in as much as the offences committed are non-cognisable. While, therefore, steps are being taken for the promulgation of a more stringent Act to be operative all over the State, we, the Foresters have been doing our share of this noble duty by forming large blocks of suitable areas of ‘Reserved Forests’ into Game Reserves or Sanctuaries. Some people seem to think that the claims of *forestry* and wild life are often in conflict with each other and that the objects and ideals of the two are sometimes antagonistic. But such ideas cannot be substantiated with facts at least in this State. Had it

not been for the unceasing efforts of the *Forest Officers* of this State, much of the wild life that still exists in reserved forests would have disappeared by now. In order to protect and preserve wild animals many of the forest officers had, in the past, and have, even now, to risk their lives in encountering thoughtless "sportsmen" or the "village hunters".

There are now five Game Sanctuaries in West Bengal, all managed by the Forest Directorate. Four of them are in the Forests of North Bengal and one, viz., the Lothian Island, in the Sundarbans of the 24-Parganas District, at the south-eastern corner of the State. The natural fauna in the remainder of the State has, as already pointed out earlier in this note, become almost extinct. Afforestation has been undertaken by, and existing private forests have been put under control of, the Forest Directorate in many of those districts mainly with a view to increase our forest areas. The possibilities of establishing National Parks where suitable species of wild animals and birds can be introduced are also under consideration of the Forest Directorate.

The largest Game Reserve in our State is the Jaldapara Reserve, with an area of 36 square miles. The area is situated on either side of the Torsa river in the Buxa Forest Division. Most of the area is subject to inundation by rivers and the vegetation is mainly tall grass and reeds with isolated patches of riverain tree species. Such localities provide excellent living conditions for a variety of animals including the one-horned rhinoceros, wild buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*, Linn) and the swamp deer, and birds including pea fowls (*Pavocristatus*, Linn).

This area was constituted a Game Sanctuary as far back as 1932, mainly with a view to affording protection to rhinoceros. Since then the area has continually been parolled and carefully watched by the forest staff, and the rhino poachers have been given a very thin time. Protection has been successful, very few animals having been lost since the sanctuary came into existence, and the sadly depleted stock of rhinoceros is steadily improving in the peace and security of the Sanctuary. Many other species of wild game which frequent the Torsa jungles, have also benefited from the protection afforded to them, and the Jaldapara Game Reserve has now abundant stocks of most of the interesting wild animals that are found in West Bengal.

Although the rhinoceros often wanders many miles into the tree forest, his real home is dense jungle up to about 20' high, which, with a few scattered trees, covers areas of the abandoned beds of the 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. Contrary to what one hears of the African rhino, ours is seldom aggressive, nor does he cause havoc to agricultural crops like the wild elephant. He is entirely herbivorous and feeds principally on tall jungle reeds and grasses.

Of the other animals that share these haunts with the rhino, wild buffalo and swamp deer, the notable ones are hog deer (*Cervus porcinus*), sambhar (*Cervus unicolor*), barking deer (*Cervulus muntjac*, Syn. *Muntiacus muntjak*, Zimm), pigs (*Sus cristatus*), tigers (*Panthera tigris*, Linn) and python (*Python molurus*). Wild elephants though only too plentiful in the surrounding forest, give the rhino and his haunts a wider berth. The few species of game birds that are also common in the area are jungle fowl (*Gallus bankiva murgli*), green pigeon (*Crocopus phoenicopterus*) and Imperial pigeon (*Muscadivora aenea sylvatica*).

Apart from giving protection from the ravages of man, the forest staff specially employed therein have to carry out annual burning in the grass lands in order to prevent a profuse growth of seedlings of trees that eventually choke up the grass which contributes so much to the well being of the herbivorous animals. The Jaldapara Reserve is a favourite place of visit for

naturalists. In the recent past people from various parts of the world, have visited the Sanctuary and have taken photographs of animals, particularly of the rare species of Rhinoceros and swamp deer. With a view to offering intensive protection to this large area of game reserve, a proposal is under contemplation to constitute this sanctuary into a separate Range under independent charge of a Forest Ranger with adequate staff. The present strength of wholtime staff, consisting of one Deputy Ranger and 10 provisional Forest Guards has been found to be quite inadequate to look after 36 square miles of game sanctuary.

There is a road from Nilpara Range Office to Jaldapara Beat through the sanctuary. It is motorable during winter and is maintained with a view to facilitating better supervision and inspection of the Sanctuary.

Senchal Game Sanctuary.—This sanctuary covers an area of 15.27 square miles in the Darjeeling Forest Division. It was established with a view to affording protection to all species of indigenous fauna except the bear. The main species found in this area are barking deer, wild pig, goral (*Nemorhaedus hodgsoni*, Pocock), serow (*Capricornis sumatraensis*, Pocock), green-pigeon, khali pheasant (*Gallus leucomelanus*) and Imperial pigeon. All these species of animals and birds have been found, on a recent survey, to be increasing in numbers considerably. Monal pheasant (*Lophophorus impejanus*) was introduced in 1936, but did not survive. This is the only sanctuary in the Darjeeling Hills and, therefore, deserves special protection for the maintenance of the local fauna, particularly in view of the increasing number of so-called "sportsmen" in and around Darjeeling. There is no special wholtime staff employed for the supervision of this Sanctuary, but the local forest officers do some patrolling within the area, in addition to their normal forest work.

Chapramari Sanctuary.—The sanctuary comprises an area of only 3 square miles in the Jalpaiguri Forest Division. Due to the very easy accessibility of most of the reserved forest in the Jalpaiguri Division, it is extremely difficult to protect the game there. The game sanctuaries in this area, therefore, require stricter control than in other Reserved Forests. This sanctuary was constituted in 1939, in order to protect mammal, bird and reptile sections of the indigenous fauna. Progressively stricter measures of control have brought about an increase in the number of game, although the scarcity of most kinds of deer still persists.

Garumara Sanctuary.—This is the only area in Jalpaiguri Forest Division, where Rhinoceros still exists. The area of the sanctuary is about 3 square miles forming a part of the riverain forests alongside the Murthi river. Other notable species of wild life in the area are bison (*Bos gaurus*), hog deer, pig, sambhar, barking deer, tiger, green and imperial pigeons, and jungle fowl.

Lothian Island in 24-Parganas.—This island, with an area of 9,389 acres (14.6 square miles) situated at the mouth of the Saptamukhi river, was constituted a game sanctuary under a Government Notification in 1948. A census of the game at the initial stage was not attempted but it is known that the available game comprises mainly a small number of Cheetal deer (*Cervus axis*), pigs and a few tigers who do not always stay in this island. Barking deer and python cannot thrive in the area due to the excessive salinity of the water. It is proposed to dig a few ponds and bale out salt water therefrom for two or three successive years with a view to bringing in sweet water necessary for the continuance of the wild life that still survives in the area.

The regions most profuse in game in the Sundarbans having gone to East Pakistan, it is all the more necessary to protect and preserve the few specimens that still persist in our portion of these tidal forests.



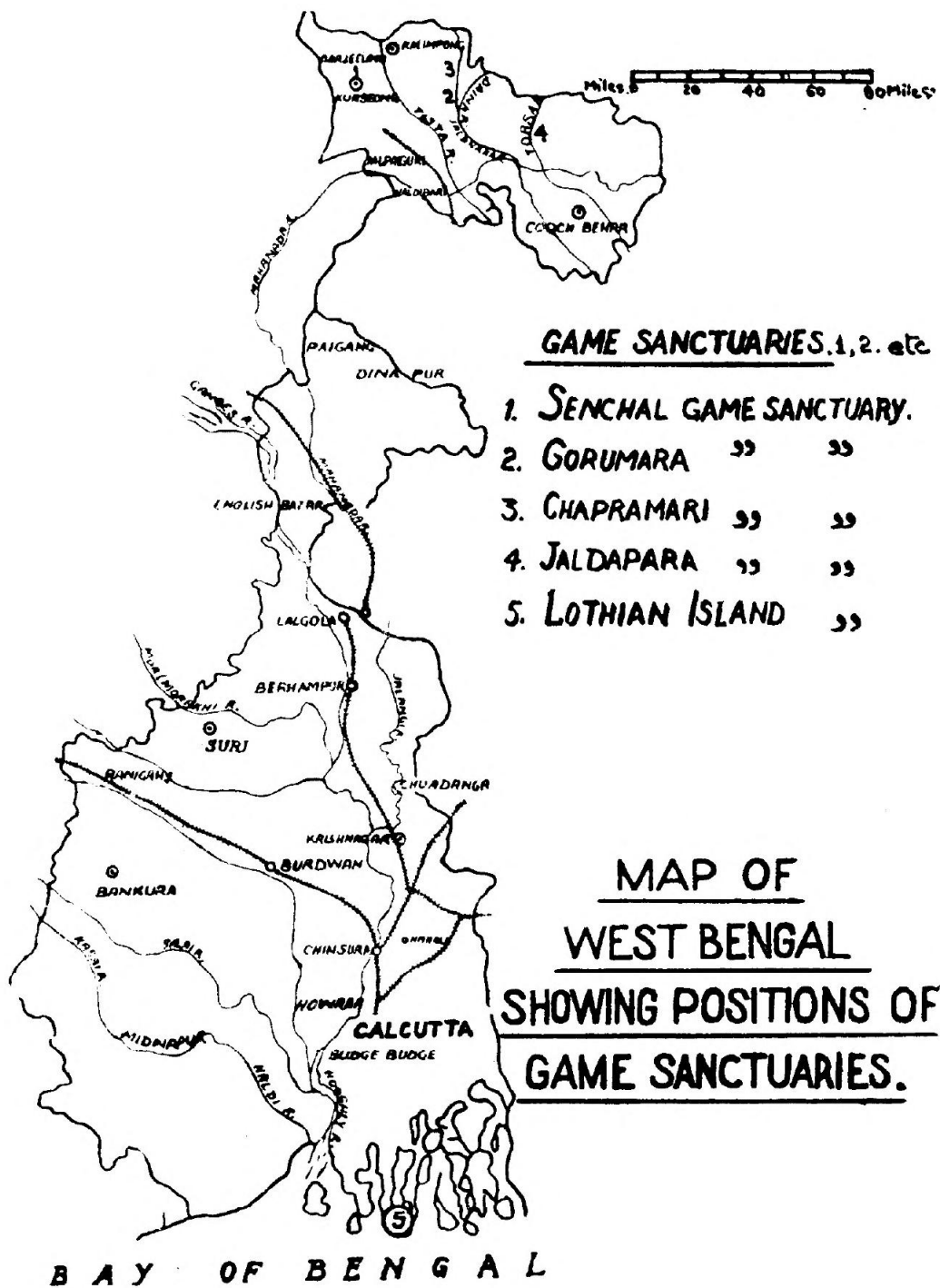
RHINO



HOG-DEER (Stag)



TIGER



It may be noted that the reserved forests (over which Government has absolute control) occur in (i) the two northern-most districts, viz., Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, which along with West Dinajpur, Malda and Cooch Behar, have since 1947 been cut off from the rest of West Bengal, and (ii) the south-eastern bit comprising the tidal forests of the 24-Parganas. It is a happy augury that the State of Cooch Behar has been merged in West Bengal, making it possible to extend strict protection to the wild fauna of the forests of that district which is similar to that of the adjoining reserved forests of Jalpaiguri District. There are also 1,500 square miles of private forests in the districts of Midnapore, Bankura, Birbhum, Burdwan, Murshidabad, Malda and West Dinajpur over which a certain amount of State control began to be exercised recently. It would take sometime before actual management of these forests is taken over by the Government whose control will then become absolute as in the case of the Reserved Forests. Once this happens, it would be possible not only to stop the further depletion of the meagre remnant of wild life that is at present found here but also to restock these areas with suitable game animals and birds to the full holding capacity of these forests.

In all the most progressive countries of the world it is recognized that the time has come to train people not to look upon wild life as something to be destroyed at sight with stick, stone, arrow or gun but to acquire a respect and sympathy for these graceful and interesting denizens of the wilds and to admire the beauty of their form and movements. Snap-shooting of game has acquired large popularity in such countries. It is no longer the blood-thirsty *shikari* who boasts of having bagged the largest number of big or small game that is most respected, but the man who has engaged himself in a game which is more arduous, requires greater patience and skill, demands greater courage and betokens greater humanity, viz., the art of taking the most interesting snap-shots of wild life in their natural habitat.

While Zoos serve to create a certain amount of interest in and sympathy for wild animals and birds, the effect of Zoos on the minds of the people is somewhat artificial. It is only when people can see wild animals in their *natural* habitat that they really get to feel for them with all their soul. The reserved forests which alone actually contain a lot of wild life at present are, as we have seen, too far from the larger cities and towns to be of use as an educating factor for the general public. The establishment of National Parks within easy reach of the bigger urban units is the only effective solution. If such Parks are established and stocked with wild animals and birds which are given perfect protection, they will serve as ideal resorts for city and town-dwellers, tired with the rush and artificiality of urban life. And this is an ideal all right-thinking people should endeavour to achieve.