

## WILD-LIFE IN ASSAM

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India is the richest country in the world in respect of her fauna and flora. Starting from the lion ( *Panthera leopersica* ) the king of animals, there is hardly any type of animal family that is not represented in this great continent. Assam is the richest of all the states in India in this respect. She also possesses some rare type of animals, e.g., the Rhino which is getting extinct in other parts of the world. Due to clearing of jungles, and indiscriminate shooting, wild-life in this country is getting rarer day by day and unless we cry a halt in this respect, we shall not only lose our rich fauna and flora, but also lose all our fertile soil that is getting washed away. Our province, Assam, had been particularly fortunate in bounty of nature and it is our precious heritage that we must protect by all possible means.

2. Of all the animals that inhabit Assam, that majestic mammoth, the elephant ( *Elephus maximus* ) takes the pride of place. From the Sadiya Frontier Tract down to Goalpara, this animal is found in all our forests and at times turns out a nuisance by destroying crops grown near the forests. Nevertheless, this animal should have all our sympathy and ruthless destruction advocated by certain people must be resisted, if we want to preserve this grand animal and profit by its existence. Forest Department has a regular cycle of catching surplus animals by *Khedda* and *Mela Shikar*, but this is often upset by other considerations and we must stop them for the good of the animal. It is estimated that we have about 5,000 elephants and quota of catch every year is over 300. Government derive a handsome yearly revenue of about Rs. 5 lacs by sale of elephants.

3. I give second place to rhinoceros ( *Rhinoceros unicornis* ), the remnant of the interesting beasts that flourished in ancient times. Three varieties *R. unicornis*, *R. sondaicus*, *R. sumatrensis* ( two-horned rhino ) were found before, but only *R. unicornis* is found in Assam. It is a massive animal, short-sighted and when enraged, is most ferocious. They have been badly slaughtered in the past, due to the medicinal value attributed to their horn and flesh. But Forest Department is now taking all manner of precautions for its protection in reserves and sanctuaries. I could see as many as 18 rhinos in course of a day with the Hon'ble Forest Minister, in Kaziranga game sanctuary sometime ago. It is easy to kill this animal, as it follows a particular track for depositing its excreta till a big heap is formed and all that is needed is to lie in wait and use powerful bullet. It likes chiefly grass land with mud pools. They are still found in different forest sanctuaries.

4. Buffalo ( *Bubalus bubalis* ) which was very common in forests of Assam, are now confined to a few reserved forests and sanctuaries. Some very large horned specimens are found in Manas and Pobha game sanctuaries. Wild buffaloes breed freely in Assam with domestic herds and improve the local breed which is one of the best in India. Buffaloes like grassland with mud holes like rhinos.

5. Bison ( *Bibos gaurus* ) called Mithun or gaur is found in the deciduous forests of Assam. It is a powerful beast, but does not attack human beings at sight which some wild buffaloes often do. Its habits are like those of buffaloes. Having reared a bison calf left forlorn by its mother, with the milk of foster buffalo mother, I found their habits similar to buffaloes and I think we could interbreed bison with buffalo.

6. Abors in the Sadiya Frontier Tract keep bison in semi-wild state and it is not unusual to find them grazing in the forests near their villages. Another kind of Mithun ( *Bibos*

*banteng barmanica* ) is found in the Mishmi and Lushai Hills. They are actually bantings, not gaurs and are reared like Mithuns by the Mishmis and Lushais.

7. Of all the carnivora of Assam, the tiger ( *Panthera tigris* ) is the foremost denizen of the forest and is found in all parts of Assam, but more frequently in the deciduous forests. As a rule, Assam tiger is not a man-eater, but occasionally taste of human blood have turned some as man-eaters. On one occasion, a Garo Hills tiger killed about 90 persons, but curiously enough, it was only the Garos that were the victims and not outsiders whose dissimilar dress was perhaps the saving factor. One hears now of the man-eating Panari tiger family of Darrang District. No serious attempt seems to have been made to exterminate the pests. Forest officers have often met tiger in course of their duties and on occasion I had the experience of a tiger galloping ahead of my car one morning in Goalpara District, on a forest road. People with money and resources often organized big *shikar* in the past and killed 50 or more tigers in one camp. This no doubt gave the person satisfaction of showing off as a big *shikaree*, but it did no good either to the animal life of the province nor to the balance of nature. Such slaughter must be prevented by all means.

8. My wife and I had the rare fortune of rearing up two tiger cubs which were found starving in a rice-field in Goalpara forests and of studying their habits. Their mother was unfortunately killed by a Governor's A.D.C., in a *shikar* camp. They were so domesticated that when they heard the footsteps of my wife coming down the steps of our Dhubri bungalow, they made a peculiar sound begging for food and for patting on the back. It is a pity that I have not got the photos of the animals in their frolic with us for exhibition. They were presented to the Zoo in Calcutta when they were the size of dogs and began to be mischievous. Once they pulled a goat down to the ground by the ear and we thought it then wise to get rid of them.

9. Next to tiger, leopard or panther ( *Panthera pardus* ) is the most common carnivora that takes toll of domestic animals. They live chiefly near human habitations and fowls, goats, dogs and cattle are its usual prey. It cannot tackle big beasts like buffaloes, but unlike tiger it can climb up trees.

10. Civet cats ( *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus* ) are found in Assam, but in Garo Hills district they are found in plenty. They are very destructive to poultry and small domestic animals and usually live in jungle close to villages.

11. Wild dog ( *Cuon alpinus* ), that scourge of wild-life, is found in most places of Assam and destroy much game. Sitting out in front of a forest bungalow and reading a book in mid-day, suddenly I discovered a barking deer running towards the bungalow. Presently a wild dog which, I thought never existed in Sylhet in those parts, appeared from the jungle chasing the deer which found human beings less dangerous than the wild dog. This animal should be shot at sight.

12. Hyænas ( *Hyæna hyana* ) are rather rare in Assam, but they, like jackals, play very useful part of scavengers and are not to be despised. Only once I have seen a hyæna eating a carcass in the daytime, while going on the Barak River by a boat.

13. Martens ( *Charrania flavigula* ) are found in the dense tree forests, but chiefly in the hills and are very destructive to birds and other small animals. Their peculiar habit of jumping off from tree to tree in search of birds and eggs make these at once noticeable. They are fairly common in the Garo Hills and in the Sadiya Frontier Tract.

14. The sloth bear ( *Melursus ursinus* ) is a common denizen of short grass jungles in the midst of forest and being short-sighted and dull of hearing, it is dangerous to single individuals, if suddenly discovered by the animal, but it will run away in presence of a group

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of men. A very interesting animal rapidly disappearing is the racoon, a species of cat bear (*Ailurus fulgens*) found in the Mishmi hills. Their skins have a beautiful yellow-brown colour and much sought for by Mishmis who often make their hats of these skins and also bring them to the Sadiya market for sale. This rare animal is, I am afraid rapidly disappearing.

15. Deer species was very well represented in Assam, but some are already extinct in some districts of Assam. *Barasingha* (*Rucervus duvaucelli*) was quite common in Goalpara forests about 30 years back, it is not found there anymore. I saw probably the last specimen in Maula Block of Western Range near Bengal border about 15 years back and it has not been reported since.

16. In the higher Mishmi hills, one can find musk deer (*Moschus moschiferous*) which are killed in large numbers by the Mishmis every year to provide musk for the Sadiya market where a regular trade goes on in the cold weather in particular.

17. Sambhar (*Rusa unicolour*) is found in all districts, but spotted deer (*Axis axis*) is found in deciduous forests only in three districts along the foot-hills of the Himalayas. It is not found on the eastern side of Darrang district. Hog deer (*Hyelaphus porcinus*) is found in plenty in our game sanctuaries, but are getting rare outside reserved forests. So also is the case with barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*). Poaching even in the reserves and non-observance of game laws have been responsible for great reduction of deer. It was not an uncommon event for a Divisional Forest Officer visiting some interior parts of the forests in the rainy season to discover a poacher's camp where venison was being dried up over a *machan* for removal and storage for an year's consumption. I regret to say that no stringent action was taken by the Civil Authorities to control unauthorized use of guns. Meches, Cacharis and other aboriginals were found to be the worst offenders in this respect. Forest subordinates engaged in anti-poaching work had often duels with them.

18. The most destructive animal to our young sal plantations is the pig. It has been my heart-breaking experience to see fully-stocked sal seedling lines being dug up clear and all succulent roots of young seedlings eaten up by pigs. They are very prolific breeders and have to be made an outlaw if sal plantations are to be made successful. I have been baffled by them even after digging trenches and permitting villages to shoot them and trap them by nets. A pigmy hog has been found by Mr. Mackrell, a keen sportsman, in Goalpara district, but this animal is nearly extinct.

19. Porcupine, that interesting animal with quills on its body as a protective measure is found in some forests. They are destructive to young simul with succulent growth. Our forests abound in many other smaller animals of which mention must be made of pangolia. (*Manis crassicaudata*), the scaly ant-eater. They are rare and deserve our sympathy and protection.

20. Of the reptiles, the great monitor lizard whose skin is prized for making ladies bags, shoes, etc., is found in plenty and eaten by the aboriginal people who kill them at sight. Python, the largest reptiles commonly called 'Ajgar' is found in most of our forests. It is not poisonous, but crushes the animals it catches by coiling round and then swallows them. It is known to swallow animals as big as barking deer and one occasion, a dead python was seen by me in Goalpara with horns of the barking deer protruding from its body. Apparently it swallowed the deer but could not manage the horns. Large poisonous snakes are not very common, but occasionally hamadryads are found in drier forests. Once I had found one 10 feet long run over by our forest Railway in Goalpara.

21. Of the monkeys, several species are found in Assam, e.g., *Macaca mulatta* (common monkey) *Macaca assemensis* (no orange red hue in the hump and found in high elevation),

*Semnopithecus entellus* (Langur) *Trachypithecus pileatus* (capped Langur) and hullock (*Hylobates hoolock*) but the last one is the most interesting of the lot, being tailless and having a high pitched howl which is taken up by all the members of the family and resounded. It is not found on the north bank of the Brahmaputhra.

22. Our province abounds in birds of all kinds, viz., peacocks, black pheasants, fowls, partridges, quails, ducks and other migratory birds. Special mention must be made of florican which was very common in deciduous forests on open glades, but they are getting rare day by day. I used to know of places where one could be certain of finding them. Their peculiar way of taking to wings straight up from the ground and the whistling of female birds in flight are the most interesting and peculiar characteristics by which they could easily be recognized. Another interesting bird peculiar to Assam and confined to the Garo Hills and K. and J. Hills only is the peacock pheasant, having the eyes of the peacock on its feathers, but the features of the pheasant. Birds having been shot by all and sundry, having guns for protection of crop and sport, without any observance of game laws, they are getting rarer day by day. Outside reserved forests, they have already got very scarce and some birds like pink-headed duck (*Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*) which I have seen before in Goalpara District, is there no more. People are ignorant and very slack in observing the game laws and in course of my tour, I have found policemen, custodians of our laws, going out for shooting birds and animals in close season, and when accosted they pleaded ignorance!

23. Assam rivers abound in sporting fish like *Mahseer*, *Boka*, *Katli*, etc., and one can find much pleasure and recreation with rod and line in our forest camps. Indeed we used to have some very keen Europeans who used to always spend their short holidays on our rivers in fishing. Here again, poaching goes on and netting and night lining are very common in our rivers, resulting in indiscriminate destruction of young fish.

24. Nature has endowed our province with rich fauna and flora but it is a fast disappearing asset. We must make our people realize the gravity of the danger of extinction. Indeed some of these rare animals have already been extinct. There is a place for all animals in Nature and a definite function to play which due to our ignorance, we often overlook. We should treat wild-life with sympathy and consideration and not kill them *ad lib*.

25. I wish to emphasize here that Assam has not got vast forests as some people think. 11% of the total area under reserved forests is hopelessly inadequate where it should have been 25%. We have got sanctuaries covering only 400 square miles which again is inadequate. Ordinary people have no forest sense and cutting trees and killing animals are in their blood. We have to educate them. If we properly protect our fauna and flora and develop our few sanctuaries by providing amenities to visitors and tourists, then apart from the scientific and cultural value, we should be able to add substantially to our state exchequer. This needs men of vision and practical wisdom who should be able to work with disinterested zeal and enthusiasm.

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