

GIANT RHINOCEROS OF AN INDIAN RESERVE

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THE Kaziranga Sanctuary in the Sibsagar District of Assam on the south bank of the River Brahmaputra consists of 170 square miles of high coarse *ikra* grass broken by shallow *bheels* or swamps, so beloved of the great Indian rhinoceros (*R. unicornis*), whose main stronghold this sanctuary is to-day; there are about 300 rhinoceroses there. On the south the sanctuary is bounded by the Mikir Hills clothed with the semi-evergreen and rain forests of Assam. The sanctuary is entered from the Assam trunk road by a track which runs through open ground and paddy fields; these act as a buffer zone between the sanctuary and the grazing areas of domesticated cattle.

Rhinoceroses, like elephants, are mainly nocturnal beasts, but in the Kaziranga Sanctuary, where they have not been shot at by sportsmen for many years, they appear to have got over their fear of man to a large degree, although accidents have happened from time to time. I saw my first rhinoceros almost immediately on entering the sanctuary, before I had climbed on to the young female elephant who was to be my slightly unsatisfactory companion on this particular outing. Owing to some exceedingly bad manoeuvring by the *mahout* and the greed of my mount, who never lost an opportunity of noisily stuffing herself with hyacinth and other succulent shoots, the rhinoceros beat a squelchy retreat out of the swamp I had seen him enter. He was an exceptionally large beast, and his flanks, shoulders and hind quarters were covered with masses of round tubercles.

After much scouting, we saw a mother



A GREAT INDIAN RHINOCEROS IN THE KAZIRANGA SANCTUARY, ASSAM.
There are about 300 of these animals in the sanctuary



"HE STOOD FOR A MINUTE OR TWO AND LOOKED FORMIDABLE"

rhinoceros with a calf on the far side of a *bheel*. Cow rhinoceroses with calves are known to have unpredictable tempers; and I was glad to have the width of the *bheel* between us in the extremely marshy ground which made heavy going for the elephant. The cow appeared from our distance to be almost black, in contrast to the big male we had seen first, who was the usual ashen grey; but this was probably due to the tricks of the morning light and the mist, a certain amount of which still clung to the ground. After holding up her huge, boat-shaped head and sniffing and snorting, she wheeled right about and shot into the grass followed by the calf.

On two occasions we got exceptionally close to rhinoceroses, and the result was some good photographs. My *mahout* seemed as inexperienced as the elephant which was our mount for this sort of business, and to have my wishes translated to the elephant that all movement should cease was a most difficult and exasperating task. Both incidents ended with the rhinoceroses steadily backing from the *bheels* into the thick grass with ponderous clumsy movements, their enormous weight causing their feet to slip in the mud as they backed out of the slush. They never took their piggy eyes off us while accomplishing this slippery retreat, puffing and snorting their disapproval of this invasion of their special wallow. There was a row of egrets on the back of one of them.

On a subsequent visit, we entered the sanctuary from its south-eastern side, and the memory of the unspoilt wildness of that area will always remain with me. Two incidents stood out from this morning's ride. The first was when we unexpectedly broke from tall grass into a clearing where the grass had been recently burnt. In the middle was a large rhinoceros cropping the new shoots. He soon saw us and trotted off picking his feet up daintily—strangely enough that is an accurate description—and stopping a couple of times to see if he was being followed.

The second rhinoceros was an enormous fellow and was unhurriedly cropping grass in an overgrown field, now cropping, now standing still or regurgitating. A Canadian doctor and his wife who were my companions were anxious to film the rhinoceros in movement, if possible charging or at any rate near-charging. Under instructions, the *mahout* repeatedly urged the elephant as close to the rhinoceros as the rhinoceros would permit before moving off. This failed to provoke the rhinoceros, until he had been driven to the edge of the grass jungle, when he stood for a minute or two, pawed the ground and looked formidable. The hoped-for charge, however, did not come, and he moved off, finally disappearing into long grass.