



**On the cover**

The golden langur, an endangered primate, is in need of protection from the wildlife trade and habitat loss.

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# Call of the wild Sanctuary. A S I A

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## 46 National Wildlife Week

Spectacular wildlife sightings in India's most famous wildlife havens have obscured the fact that almost half of the country's wildlife habitats have vanished in the past three decades. Indian wildlife is in serious trouble in every state of the country. Our water security is linked to the survival of our forests and wild spaces. What does the future hold?



## 16 Gya-Miru, Last Refuge of the Tibetan Argali

The proposed Gya-Miru Wildlife Sanctuary on the western fringe of the Tibetan plateau is the last remaining habitat for the endangered Tibetan argali in India, writes wildlife researcher Tsewang Namgail. Months spent on the trail of the argali and other high-altitude mountain species have convinced him of the need to declare this harsh, yet beautiful, wilderness as a Protected Area, in order to safeguard its wildlife for future generations.

## 30 Meghalaya's Vanishing Wilderness

Anwaruddin Choudhury has a special affinity for the wildlife and forests of Meghalaya, the state where he grew up. Clouded leopards, Wreathed Hornbills, pitcher plants and even red pandas, Meghalaya is a treasure trove of biodiversity. But the threats – coal and uranium mines, dams, *jhumming* and deforestation – are very real and a solution must be found before the state's wilderness areas vanish forever.

## Contributors



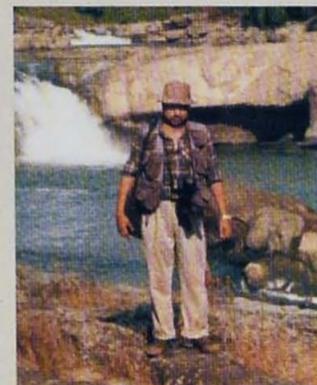
### Tsewang Namgail

A wildlife biologist, he is interested in Trans-Himalayan wildlife and the interaction between wild and domestic ungulates. **16**



### Salam Rajesh

A writer, researcher and photographer, he is deeply concerned about the wildlife of Manipur. **22**



### Anwaruddin Choudhury

Honorary Executive of the Rhino Foundation, he has spent a lifetime studying and protecting the wilds of northeast India. **30**



### Shomita Mukherjee

An ardent promoter of small carnivore conservation in India, she has been involved in wildlife research for the past 13 years. **36**

# Kaziranga

*the great escape*



Text and photographs by Asim Ghosh

This story starts with my meeting Ranjit Barthakur in his incarnation as a telecom executive several years ago. I soon discovered that he led a secret life, with his charming wife Radhika and childhood friend Manju Barua, as co-founder of the Wild Grass nature resort in Kaziranga. An extension of this life, or perhaps the progenitor, is his passion as an active (his friends would say hyperactive!) conservationist. With many good intentions, this led to a resolution that we would organise a joint visit, but as with all good resolutions, it took some five years to make this one happen.

Kaziranga has an undeservedly low profile for a variety of reasons. The almighty tiger has seized our national imagination as the mascot of conservation. The rhino is more of an African cause than an Indian one, and Kaziranga epitomises the great one-horned Indian rhino. Also, Kaziranga is not easy to get to, no daily flights to a nearby airport followed by an easy car drive. Assam's law and order tensions over the last few years, perhaps worse in profile than in reality, have not helped.

But there is a simple, one-stop, turn-key solution to all of this. The young team of nature enthusiasts at Wild Grass will set up a few dream days for you, right from arriving in Jorhat or Guwahati, till your departure. You arrive, they meet you, and every trivial detail is taken out of your care thereafter.

Assam envelopes you in a laid-back charm within minutes of your arrival. The great Brahmaputra plain, more Indo-Malayan in character than the Indo-Gangetic plain of North India, swathes the state. As you drive from Guwahati, there is very little evidence of communal

tension, just the usual checkpoint every few miles with a few ambling policemen or army soldiers. You pass village after impeccably clean village, with smiling and well-dressed children forming a neat advertisement for those who would still swear by Thoreau. This is not a land with a chip on its shoulder.

The dominant impression of Kaziranga is that of alluvial grassland, which is indeed the case, as the park is a creature of the Brahmaputra flood plain. Some 40 per cent of the park's 430 sq. km. is tall elephant grass and, left to itself, this would probably engulf much of the rest. But in a farming tradition that goes back hundreds of years, the tall grass is burnt down annually, originally to make way for crops, and now to grow the shorter grass suitable for rhinos. As you drive over the *bund*-like roads, the grassland stretches as far as the eye can see, broken only by copses, majestic solitary *Bombax* trees and *bheels* (the local name for small lakes or ponds; would be interesting for an etymologist to see if the word is cognate to the Hindi *jheel*). The annual burning is carried out under the strict supervision of the forest department, and in many ways goes against the non-interventionist school of conservation, which holds any human intervention in the natural ecology taboo. But no burning, no rhino – the short grass is what they feed on, as do the deer and the buffalo.

The highlight of visiting Kaziranga has to be the elephant-back ride to see the rhino, a trip that has numerous wild buffalo, barasingha and other small mammals thrown in for good measure. You arrive at the park before sunrise or before sunset. On our first day, we got off

the Gypsy to be greeted by a tumbling elephant calf, which rolled forward, trunk outstretched, to meet every new vehicle. I assumed this to be an expression of the exceptional domestication of the Forest Department's livestock, till it dawned on me that I was supposed to feed Raju (what other name would you give a baby elephant!) bananas. Alas, we were not forewarned, and Raju would not condescend to clumps of grass.

We set off on a convoy of about half a dozen elephants in the midst of the most picturesque morning fog. Raju too ambled along rapidly, sometimes behind his mother, sometimes between her legs. As the sun rose and burnt the fog off, we approached some feeding rhino. A mother and calf took my fancy, and I encouraged the *mahout* to get as close to them as his expertise allowed us to go. At the same time, I did not want to disturb the animals in any way. The pictures were worth it, but an experience two days later, left me shaken at how unpredictable these creatures can be.

We were in a Gypsy, driving sedately along a *bund* road in the Eastern Range of the reserve, when we sighted a mother with a large calf some 500 m. away, surely a non-threatening distance. The mother looked up and then started to feed again. Suddenly she seemed to have a change of mind and apparently decided we needed a lesson in respecting her privacy. She started trotting towards us. The baby rhino, on the other hand, did not seem to have a mind of its own. Whatever mother thought was good enough! So the two-creature rhinocade gathered pace in a loping crescent towards our convoy of two vehicles. It didn't matter that by now, we were moving rapidly away from them. As they gathered speed, so did we. There was a lot of clanging of metal on the sides of the vehicles and shouting, all to no avail. I found that our accompanying ranger had turned quite agile, and already had his rifle ready. At a speed of 30 km. per hour, the rhino pair were closing in on us. Fortunately, before my thoughts could attain melodramatic heights, the gap started to widen, and I reckon we were judged to be out of threatening range.

I learned that mother rhinos accompanied by calves can be quite unpredictable, and are capable of running for several kilometres at sustained speeds of over 20 km. per hour. The saving grace is that if you turn, they keep running straight. However, that is not very helpful advice if you are on a straight *bund* road without a branch for miles!

On a serious note, the plains' rhino that are approached by elephants

regularly are used to them, and the forest department has an excellent track record of safety. Needless to say, on an elephant-back safari on Day 3, my exhortations added to the *mahout's* caution.

Enough talk of rhinos. There are numerous other mammals in the park, including the usual suspects: leopard, wild boar, sambar, and expectedly, the wild buffalo and, at the right times of the year, wild elephant. Kaziranga is said to hold the largest concentration of tigers in India, though the terrain does not lend itself to easy sightings. More unique to the park are the barasingha and the Indian muntjac.

The great surprise of Kaziranga, however, are the birds. Situated at the confluence of the Himalayan foothills to the north, the great Burmese forests to the east, and the great Indian riverine plains to the west, Kaziranga has to be one of the great birders' paradises in the world. I learned that among that rather specialised community, this is commonplace knowledge, but it is certainly not a well-known fact to the common or garden nature tourist. So if you go to Kaziranga, make sure you take the best binoculars you can buy or borrow. And if you are into photography, remember that you need, ideally, a telephoto

lens of 600 mm. to get any really decent shots of birds.

We were extremely fortunate to have Maan Barua, Manju's son, accompanying us on several birding outings. Maan has a prodigious knowledge of the region's flora and fauna, and a knack of picking out a bird in a location, which to our untrained eye was just another tree. It was my first proper birding trip, other than childhood trips to Bharatpur, which were altogether another kettle of fish.

In all, we saw some 60 species of birds in the one-and-a-half day we devoted specifically to birding, but I am told that some 300 species have been sighted in the park, including 100 migratory species.

Wild Grass is now branching out into more comprehensive tours in the northeast. They will organise anything from a customised tour across Assam living in a series of old tea planters' bungalows, to trips to Arunachal's great Buddhist monasteries, and rafting or boat trips along Assam's many rivers. In fact, we were fortunate to stop over at the beginning of our trip at the Nameri Tiger Reserve, where the Assam Forest Department runs a charming tented camp. Our morning wake-up call was the loud whooshing of two Greater Pied Indian Hornbills, and a more majestic sight than to see a pair alighting on a tall *Bombax* tree cannot be imagined. 

*While the rhino might be Kaziranga's star attraction, misty morning elephant rides and glimpses of wild buffalo are no less rewarding.*

