



On the cover

One of the rarest sights in Manas, a tiger out in the open. Can we bring the rhino back to this natural wonderland?

Photographer: Joanna Van Gruisen

Editor

Bittu Sahgal

Principal Advisor

Ranjit Barthakur

Managing Editor

Miel Sahgal

Assistant Editors

Lakshmy Raman

Jennifer Scarlott

Consulting Editor

Ashish Fernandes

Editorial

Shivani Shah

Arundhuti Mitra

Shyla Boga

Design

Umesh Bobade

Rajkumar Gopalan

Advertising

Shashi Kumar

Circulation and Subscriptions

P. Bhaskar

Processing

Jasra Graphics Pvt. Ltd.

Printing

Sel Print India Pvt. Ltd., Mumbai

Distribution

India Book House, Mumbai



Sanctuary Asia is printed and published 12 times a year (two editions) by Shashi Kumar. To submit articles or photographs, write to us for terms and guidelines (we cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited material). Reproduction in whole or part, electronically or in print, without prior written permission of the publisher is strictly prohibited. For back issues, contact the Subscription Department.

Sanctuary Asia

145/146, Pragati Industrial Estate,
N.M. Joshi Marg, Lower Parel,
Mumbai 400 011.

Tel.: (91-22) 2301 6848/49

www.sanctuaryasia.com

E-mail: <mail@sanctuaryasia.com>

Call of the wild Sanctuary.

A S I A

Vol. XXVI No. 1, February 2006

22 Manas – Looking Back, Looking Forward

The Manas river flows from the gorges of Bhutan and waters one of India's most vital protected forests. This paradise on Earth, once best known for rhinos, has seen major upheavals that have left it tattered, but astonishingly, not completely torn. Dr. Anwaruddin Choudhury writes on the fall and tentative rise of the Manas National Park.



50 The Mating Tusker

Bivash Pandav, a Sanctuary-ABN AMRO Wildlife Service Award winner, writes movingly of the death of a tusker he had observed over time in the Chilla range in the Rajaji National Park. The relocation of *Gujjars* (herdsmen) from Chilla has ushered in rapid and remarkable habitat and wildlife recovery. The author warns, however, that the problems are far from over. Forest corridors are still threatened by all manner of people including worshippers of elephants.



54 Land of Cold Falling Water

The impressive and mystical mountain system of Anggo Ching on the Manipur-Burma border finds mention in the accounts of the kings of Manipur. Salam Rajesh treks through these thick forests that house a rich biological diversity ranging from orchids to macaques. He explored the Trui-li-li waterfall and the Achomaki lake and fell in love with this land of cold falling water.

Contributors



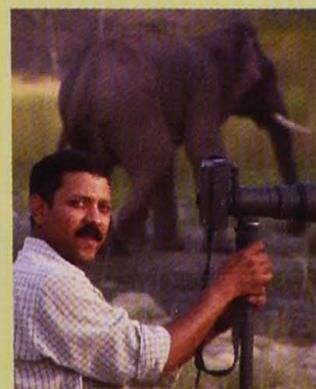
Manoj V. Nair

An IFS officer, he is a wildlife biologist by training and believes that the future of our wilds is in the hands of the younger generation. **32**



Joanna Van Gruisen

A naturalist-photographer, she has spent her life documenting and studying the wildlife of India. **42**



Bivash Pandav

A wildlife biologist and researcher, he is as concerned about elephants in Corbett and Rajaji as turtles in Bhitarkanika. **50**



Salam Rajesh

Natural history writer, researcher and photographer, he is deeply committed to the protection of Manipur's wilderness areas. **54**

Paradise Regained?

a week in Manas

by Manoj V. Nair

"I can think of no part of the world which can boast of greater scenic enchantment combined with rich and varied wildlife than this strip of Himalayan foothills – especially where the magnificent rivers debouch from their gorges and spill far and wide on to the shingle and sand of the plains."

– E.P. Gee on Manas in 'Wild Life of India'

When as a 12-year-old boy I first read these lines, I couldn't wait to visit this wondrous place. My mind conjured up images of dark jungles echoing the tiger's moaning call and the enigmatic golden langur cavorting high up in the rainforest canopy. But by the time I was old enough to plan a trip, the Park had undergone catastrophic changes. The magnificent tapestry of wilderness was torn asunder by an armed insurrection, leaving in its wake a forlorn forest, out of bounds for the public and open to poachers. Though things have improved considerably of late, Manas is still a mere shadow of its former self; a paradise lost. I had to go and see for myself, even at the risk of destroying the mystic Manas of my childhood fantasies. I spent eight days inside the Park in April, and then again in September 2005, exploring the area fairly extensively and here is what I saw, heard and experienced...

BANSBARI AREA AND POHU FIELD

It is barely dawn; a wispy veil of mist shrouds the tall Titasopa *Michelia champaca* trees in the range office compound at Bansbari, entry point to the Park. Between the shady boughs, birds perch half-hidden among the foliage. "Wuck-voor, wuck-voor", one of them calls sonorously; Green Imperial Pigeons. Not a bad start I think, as I set

out towards Pohu Field, a large grassland patch. It rained last night and the forest road is like a visitor's book – numerous Red Jungle Fowl, a solitary sambar, a pair of porcupines and several unidentified small carnivores, (possibly civets) have all made their entries since the rain! The patch has been recently burnt, and visibility is good. Despite this, hog deer manage to merge into the short tussocks of *Saccharum* grass and clumps of *Leea* bushes. They flush literally from under my feet, when almost trodden upon like live jacks-in-the-box! Peafowl calls rend the dawn calm. I recall that Manas forms the easternmost distribution limit of two very common species – peafowl and chital.

I walk on, the sun bright and hot. Zitting and Bright-headed Cisticolas call *ad nauseum*, Ashy Prinias give them valiant competition from swaying grass-stalks. Not to be left out, from a Himolu *Bombax ceiba* tree, a Black Partridge calls out like a hawker selling his wares – "pyaz, adrak, lassun" – he cackles, time and again, (in parts of Assam, I have heard the call being described as "pan, beedi, cigarette" as well!). Against the verdant grass and azure sky, anything white stands out in vivid contrast – the wings of a male Bengal Florican as he leaps up in display, the forewing patch

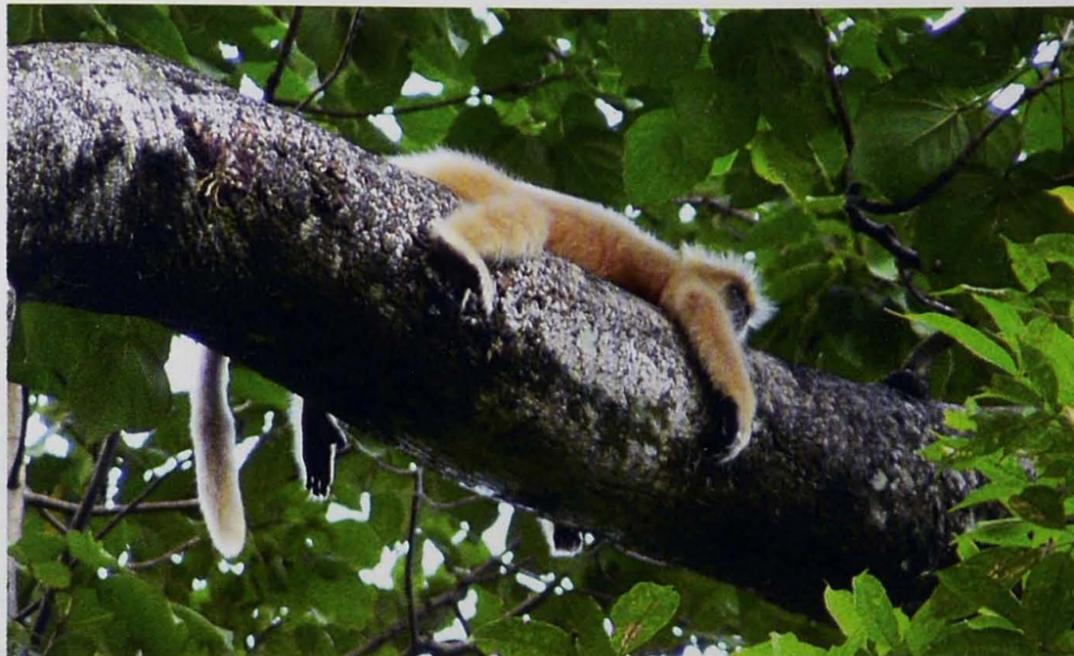


of a coasting Pied Harrier and a Black Baza's glistening breast band as it soars above. It is here that Pied Harriers were first recorded breeding within the Indian limits. I keep a sharp lookout for pygmy hogs and hispid hare too, for this is their favourite haunt. The Park has an extraordinarily high diversity of mammals, 60 species having been recorded. But instead of the diminutive pig, a wild boar and her seven striped piglets dash out from cover.

As the sun ascends, bird activity drops and it is time to botanise a bit – a ground orchid blooms in full splendour, purple *Osbeckias* are conspicuous among the grass, delicate fungi pop out of elephant dung and there among the ferns is the lovely inflorescence of *Curcuma*, the wild turmeric, with a lynx spider on its pink petals. A substantial portion of the grassland has woodland species invading it – *Leea*, *Grewia* and *Bombax*. I wonder whether this augurs well for Manas; unfortunately, we still have not worked out the dynamics of succession and effects of burning in woodland-grassland mosaics, especially in the wet alluvial grassland tracts of Northeast India, a fact, which has certainly hindered intelligent management interventions. On our way back, a snake, possibly a red-necked keelback slithers away into the leaf litter.

LATAJHAR CAMP AND KURIBEEL

Latajhar, a field camp between Bansbari and Mathanguri, is surrounded by tall grassland, riparian forest and scattered woodland. On a five-hour long elephant patrol with the field staff, we traverse along Buraburi, Kuribeel, Pygmy Hog Farm and Uchila, all areas rich in wildlife. Our riding elephants, Parbati and Chameli, tunnel their way through tall grass, wade through shallow *beels* and pad silently along the dense riverine patch. The habitat is excellent. A herd of wild buffalo luxuriate in the cool mud of a wallow, but do not allow us to approach close, unlike those in Kaziranga. Obviously, the poaching hangover remains. As we enter a patch of woodland, we encounter a herd of gaur cropping the lush growth. Among them is a courting pair, a huge bull



MANOJ NAIK

The Park has an extraordinary high diversity of mammals and the golden langur seen here in the quiet of its rainforest canopy is an endemic restricted to Manas and adjoining areas in Bhutan.

nudging a female. He stands and snorts defiance at us, perhaps showing off before his lady love!

There are no big *beels* here, and I am glad when we finally reach Kuribeel. The *mahouts* water the elephants, disturbing a basking Malayan box turtle. Buffalo, elephant and deer tracks abound, and among the tall grasses fringing the *beel*, there are wild boar nests. But in this fascinating *beel*-scape of tall grass, squelchy wallows, and blue-green water, I sorely miss the rhino. Nevertheless, a slender ray of hope still lingers, for isolated sightings were reported in 2005 and the Park is a potential reintroduction site.

As we leave the grassland and enter a dense patch of woodland, the elephant abruptly stops mid-stride and thumps her trunk on the ground in alarm – she has picked up a scent. Fresh tiger scat! We scout around in eager anticipation but there is nothing save some claw marks on an *Uriam Bischofia javanica* tree. Disappointed, we continue and the jungle closes around us again. Parbati appears nervous and restless; soon we find out why. A grey shadow under a distant tree – a big makhna. Through the field glasses, I notice a trickle of drying musth fluid near his ears. We choose not to press closer.

Back at Latajhar camp, the watchtower is a wonderful place from

A giant wood spider (below) spins a web in its forest home. Manas is a mix of tall grass (previous page), squelchy wallows, blue-green water, riparian forest and scattered woodland – making it an exciting haven for a great variety of species.



MANOJ NAIK

which to watch birds. It is breeding season and Red Collared Doves court amorously, a Grey-headed Pygmy Woodpecker drills its nest-hole on an *Oxi Dillenia pentagyna* branch and a female Rosy Minivet picks lichens off a branch to line her nest. Red-whiskered and Ashy Bulbuls mob a lurking Crested Goshawk without success. The hawk is supremely nonchalant until a Racket-tailed Drongo appears and dive-bombs him with shrill battle-cries. In the canopy, Fairy Blue birds and Hill Mynas whistle and frolic. Black-crested Yellow and White-throated Bulbuls forage in the middle tier. The understory resounds with the fluty songs of Abbot's and Puff-throated Babblers. I watch spellbound as a flock of Sultan Tits and a pair of Silver-breasted Broadbills flit by. Patches of woodland like this support a multitude of evergreen specialist birds, which descend from the mountains of Bhutan in the north.

On our way back, we scare a muntjac male who barks in annoyance before moving away. In the soft mud of the trail that we have just walked, superimposed on our tracks are the unmistakable paw-prints of a leopard! The large cat has followed minutes after we have passed. We are thrilled, but from our left comes the coughing alarm of capped langurs and the disturbed chattering of agitated birds. As we return hurriedly, dusk slowly spreads her mantle around the camp; the first of the Large-tailed Nightjars begins to call hesitantly. "Chaunk, chaunk, chaunk"—his staccato intonation is instantly answered by a second bird nearby and further beyond, a third one. Barred Owlets screech and ululate from the woodland, and from afar, two Oriental Scops Owls start a duet. As the night deepens, something rustles near the refuse dump behind the camp. The torchlight catches the eyeshine of a scavenging Himalayan crestless porcupine, then another, and finally a third. They are so engrossed in their feeding that I am able to creep up close and take pictures.

MATHANGURI AND PANBANG

The Forest Bungalow at Mathanguri on the Indo-Bhutan border nestles in



MANOJ V. NAIR



MANOJ V. NAIR

The common *Punchinello* butterfly (left), usually found flying near water, basks on a boulder. In eight wonderful days, the author saw an array of orchids and wild flowers, 18 species of mammals, around 60 species of butterflies and 208 birds species including the delightful Velvet-fronted Nuthatch *Sitta frontalis* (right).

a fabulously picturesque setting, overlooking a spectacular vista, among the best I have ever seen. Fast and furious flows the sparkling Manas, fringed with silver shingle and white sand; beyond loom the mountains, blue and inviting. Clothed with closed canopy forests, this unbroken and vast swathe of wilderness forms part of the Royal Manas National Park of Bhutan and stretches all the way to the blue mountains, north and east. In the west, it extends to the Buxa Tiger Reserve in West Bengal. On an early morning hike, I climb along the riverside trail to the border, and continue further ahead into the Panbang trail in Bhutan. Dense forests, the frothing river and the rugged slopes make the scene

brehtaking. Far below, on a shingle bank on the Bhutan side of the gorge, stands a lone wild buffalo bull, his horns describing two graceful arcs of awesome proportion. A Brown-headed Gull in full breeding plumage flies upstream. An Osprey quarters the still waters, treading wind occasionally as if suspended by an invisible thread. As I watch, down it stoops and plunges into the rippled skin of the river to emerge a second later with a large fish in its talons. All around, the foothill slopes have lovely forests. This is hornbill country, and I'm lucky to see a few Great Pied, Wreathed and a pair of Rufous-necked Hornbills. Barred Cuckoo Doves flutter off the trail. The forests around the

The glossy black gaur is a shy animal that rarely attacks unless spooked. Its population is doing relatively well in Manas and large herds can be seen in the grasslands in winter.



MANOJ V. NAIR

tourist complex teem with capped langur and an occasional Malayan giant squirrel. Just across the river, I watch a golden langur troop feed on a Gamari *Gmelina arborea* tree, their blonde pelage resplendent in the soft slanting light of early evening.

Back in the forest bungalow, as I complete my day's field notes by candlelight, a tucktoo gecko *ka-ko's* loudly, adding one more entry to my reptile list for the trip. This is one of the largest species of gecko in India with a call that can easily carry over 100 m. on a still night.

KOKLABARI AND SEED FARM AREA

After six days at the Central Range, I am in Koklabari, in the Eastern Range at the guesthouse of the Manas Maozigendri Eco-Tourism Society (MMES), a conservation NGO in eastern Manas. For two days, we tramp the area, especially the derelict Government Seed Farm. Although the forest is noticeably degraded, the enthusiasm of the local *Bodo* youngsters, who aim to be nature guides, make up for it. The budding naturalists see a plethora of birds including rarities like the Violet Cuckoo and the elusive Bristled Grassbird. A yellow-throated marten hiding in the darkness of a climber-laden tree is a pleasant bonus. But the highlight is the area where they have been monitoring a population of over 12 pairs of Bengal Floricans. As we ride our bicycles on a raised embankment, far ahead is a smudge of black. It is a male Florican, magnificent in his breeding plumage, with neck outstretched and feathers erect, indulging in the 'standing display'. Soon we spot more, as they perform their display jump, shooting up from the standing grass before disappearing again into its depths. In about an hour, we count seven males and a female. I'm also lucky enough to see two olive-green eggs, which a wandering cowherd has spotted in a nest.

BIDDING ADIEU...

Eight wonderful days have passed in a jiffy and it is time to leave. I have seen 18 species of mammals, the birdlist stands at 208, the butterfly list flutters around in the 60s, I have pictures of an unidentified frog, several

orchids and flowers and untold memories... What more could one ask for? And Manas was as wonderful as I had imagined. Now, as I walk towards the village edge to catch the morning bus from Koklabari back to Guwahati, a bird glides down to the road from a bamboo clump, picks up a caterpillar and returns to its perch. It is large and handsome with a black crest, white collar, reddish wings and long graduated tail. I am amazed to see the Chestnut-winged Cuckoo, one of the rarest of Indian cuckoos, here in a village homestead. In the bird, I see a good omen. And a harbinger of hope for Manas – a paradise we almost lost, but which it is up to us to regain.

POST-SCRIPT

Since 2001, the situation in Manas has seen considerable improvement. And now, with insurgency having taken a backseat, the Park management is trying hard to regain the Park's lost glory. The situation is just right with abundant political will at the Assam Government level, a young and dynamic Bodoland Territorial Council leadership, pro-active Park management, the return of tourists, and most importantly, the goodwill of the local people. Particularly heartening are two recent developments. First, the Ultapani Conclave, a get-together of like-minded activists and nature-lovers, which

culminated in the Manas Biosphere Conservation Forum, a consortium of conservation groups working for Manas. Second, the Koklabari Initiative, a unique experiment where a group of local *Bodo* youth and activists of the All Bodo Students' Union have formed the Manas Maozigendri Eco-tourism Society along the eastern range. They have initiated awareness campaigns in the area, formed protection squads, reformed dreaded poachers and have worked with missionary zeal to conserve the forests and wildlife, aiming to promote eco-tourism with community participation.

It is a time of hectic activity in the Park as roads are being relaid, bridges repaired, camps renovated, staff deployed and resthouses restored. But this should not breed complacency. Manas continues to be plagued by the ghosts of its troubled past. The Park is critically understaffed, poaching and illegal logging continues albeit at a much lesser scale and most importantly, there still remains a lot of inertia among the staff. Despite this, Manas is slowly but steadily marching back to being the premier Protected Area and nature tourism hotspot that it once was. Our aim should be to seize this favourable climate and sustain the momentum of the last few years. 🐾

Clothed with closed canopy forests, a sparkling, frothing Manas river with its silver-shingle and white-sand shores and rugged slopes, presents a spectacular and picturesque landscape.



MANOJ NAIK