



**On the cover**

This leopard, framed by golden grass, has found safe refuge in the 'Realm of the Tiger' in Ranthambhore. Such visions have inspired generations of writers, photographers and conservationists, including the authors: *Anjali & Jaisal Singh and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra.*

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# Call of the wild Sanctuary. A S I A

Vol. XXXI No. 4, August 2011



**Cover Story**

**Ranthambhore – The Tiger’s Realm**

Anjali and Jaisal Singh and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra have jointly authored and photographed this stunning visual presentation of Rajasthan’s premier tiger reserve. The book is a labour of love – a selection of their favourite photographs, sifted from a vast archive built up over the years and dedicated “In memory of Rajiv Gandhi.” Published by Sujan Art, this book is proof positive that the wildlife baton that is being handed over to the next generation is in good hands. **10**



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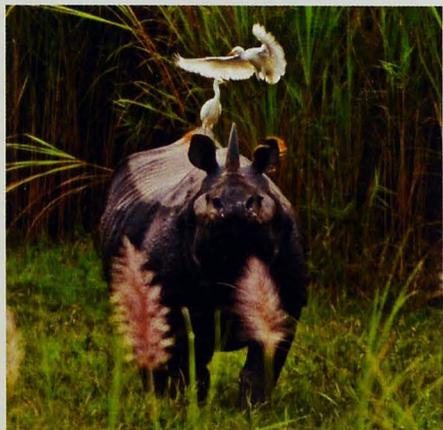
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# Orang

*From abandoned villages to a national park*

**By Dr. Anwaruddin Choudhury**

I was returning from the Ramkong Camp in Assam's Orang National Park when a sudden movement behind the tall grass alerted me. A quick glimpse of a receding orangish back brought to mind a swamp deer. They do after all acquire an orange-hued bright coat in late winter. The only kink in my theory was that there were no swamp deer in Orang. It suddenly hit me – it was a tiger. The light-and-shade effect had camouflaged the stripes. I looked again in the same direction and was blessed with another glimpse, this time of its tail confirming my second guess. That was just one of the many sightings of the big cat that I have had in the Rajiv Gandhi Orang National Park.

Orang is one of the few Protected Areas (PAs) in the Northeast where a tiger sighting is still possible and that too relatively frequently. The tiger population is believed to be a healthy 18 to 20 individuals. Mohammed Feroz Ahmed, a young herpetologist-turned-big-cat specialist, has repeatedly camera-trapped at least 18 tigers in the park. In December 2010, Feroz and I travelled to Mawsynram, the wettest place on earth, for camera-trapping small mammals. We spoke about our concerns about an increasing tiger population. With limited scope for dispersal, the sub-adults were at risk from adult tigers, and territorial battles, often fatal, between, adult males were all too likely. While translocation is a possibility, the cat has not fared well in nearby PAs and faces a variety of threats in the Dibru-Saikhowa and Laokhowa-Burhachapori complexes in Assam, Dampa in Mizoram and Namdapha in Arunachal Pradesh. Any relocation initiatives must not be initiated unless protection measures in these areas are upgraded.

## A TALE OF TRANSFORMATION

What sets Orang apart from other PAs in Assam? Orang had a number of well-settled villages till the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when repeated bouts of *kala-azar* epidemic forced the villagers to shift elsewhere. Remnants of temples and ponds are still seen. But once abandoned and free of human interference, it didn't take long for nature to take over. The area turned into a grassland with woodland patches. Wild animals soon joined the party. The area was colonised by the great Indian one-horned rhinoceros, tiger, hog deer, wild pig and varied birdlife, mostly from adjacent *chapories*. These *chapories* had contiguity through the riverine tracts of the Brahmaputra with the then game reserves of Laokhowa and Kaziranga. The British administration acted promptly and declared Orang as a Game Reserve for the protection of rhinos in 1915, making it among the earliest PAs of India. In 1985, it was proposed for upgradation to a wildlife sanctuary. However, claims and objections took a long time to sort out. In 1996, the late Nagen Sharma took charge of the Forest Department as Minister and I had the opportunity to brief him. He immediately intervened and the sanctuary was notified in 1998. He was one of the few Forest Ministers that the people of Assam will always remember. He was keen to add to the list of national parks in Assam to provide enhanced protection to wilderness areas. Orang was an automatic choice along with Nameri and I added Dibru-Saikhowa thanks to the interest shown by Harish Sonowal, then Assam's Secretary of Forests. At the time, I was a Deputy Secretary in the Forest Department. Nameri was declared as a national park in 1998 while Orang and Dibru-Saikhowa in 1999.

## WONDERFUL BIODIVERSITY VAULT

The Orang National Park covers an area of 78.80 sq. km. of alluvial grassland in the flood plains of the Brahmaputra river, a few patches of woodlands and some excellent old plantations of the Forest Department. Located in the Darrang and Sonitpur districts of central Assam, with a bulk of it in the former, the park also has several wetlands, the most prominent being the Satsimolu, Chaila and Rowmari *beels*. Satsimolu, of course, is now almost completely silted over and has become a huge expanse of tall grass.

To many, Orang is a tinier version of Kaziranga with similar terrain and grasslands and its famous rhino residents. From 35 rhinos in 1972, the numbers rose to 65 by 1985. Bhupen Talukdar, the ranger who was deeply attached to Orang had turned the park into a virtual fortress with support from R. Bhattacharjee, the then DFO. These measures resulted in the rhino population reaching almost 100 by 1991. Unfortunately, Talukdar had to leave for personal reasons and his sudden departure tragically resulted in an increase in poaching incidents. Rhino numbers fell to 46 by 1999, and some of these were, in fact, 'immigrant' rhinos from the Pabitora Sanctuary. A fund crunch and resultant staff shortages made it difficult to strengthen wildlife protection. Even basic patrol gear such as boots, sweaters, raincoats and wages for temporary staff (the anti-poaching backbone) were unavailable.

Fortunately, a few leading conservationists including Anne Wright and some tea companies that had a stake in the wildlife fringe areas, decided to form an NGO, 'The Rhino Foundation for Nature in NE India'. I took over as its Founder Chief Executive in 1995. The first project we took on was to provide the patrol staff their basic equipment. We helped replace wireless systems, construct anti-poaching camps, provided motorcycles, motorised and country boats and other such vital equipment. One of the people who literally changed Orang's fortunes was an informer, the late Abdur Rashid who died of suspected malaria at the young age of 18. His



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father Jamal Ali was part of the Forest Department and lost his life to poachers in an encounter. Rashid was an invaluable intelligence source for both Dr. Bibhab Talukdar of Aaranyak and me and is one among several unsung heroes of Kaziranga and Orang.

## WILD HERITAGE

The main prey base of Orang's only big cat (there are no leopards) are hog deer and wild pig and supplemented domestic livestock. A few muntjac and rhesus macaques add to the tiger's diet. Many of the former are rescued animals that were released here. The fishing cat, jungle cat, jackal, otter (vanishing fast thanks to the skin trade), Gangetic river



Orang's vast expanse of wet savanna grassland is among the largest in Northeast India and is therefore a vital habitat of the great Indian one-horned rhinoceros (facing page). Orang's rhino population now exceeds 60 and the majestic animals that were once hunted to extinction for their distinctive horns move between the park and the Pabitora Sanctuary, which too has a viable rhino population.



AARAVYAK / TRIPUJI - FIROZ AHMED

A tigress camera-trapped during the day in the Orang National Park. Orang is one of the few Protected Areas in the Northeast where a tiger sighting is reasonably possible. The tiger population is believed to be around 20 individuals and indirect signs such as pugmarks (top) and direct sightings are more frequent than ever before. Mohammed Feroz Ahmed, a young herpetologist-turned-big-cat specialist, has camera-trapped at least 18 different tigers in the park.

dolphin and rufous-tailed hare have also been recorded in Orang. Tuskers are seen in the park and seem very comfortable with the Forest Department's 20 or so female domestic elephants. Some feral water buffaloes have been known to interbreed with wild bulls. The few pygmy hogs that were released in Orang in the 1970s were believed to have died. However, Feroz Ahmed has reported seeing nests that resembled those of these fascinating, diminutive swines.

Orang's bird count hovers around 250 species and it harbours globally important populations of Swamp Francolin and Bengal Florican, both threatened, the former 'vulnerable' and the latter 'critically endangered'. Innumerable ducks, geese and waders winter in the park. I once saw the rare Bristled Grass Warbler here and have observed Pallas's and Grey-headed Fish Eagles breeding in Orang too. Large Cormorants can be seen in their hundreds and I have also spotted Black Storks, Lesser and Greater Adjutants and White-necked and Black-necked Storks. The Spot-billed or Grey Pelican used to breed in the park but is no longer seen. The Finn's Baya, a 'vulnerable' and localised bird, adds to the richness of Orang's avian diversity. Its presence is best confirmed by looking for its unique nest. During the monsoons, one needs to drive cautiously not to crush tricarinate turtles that move on the road! Each year turtles and pythons succumb to the annual grass burn, but there is no option to burning grasslands to maintain them.

**PROTECTING ORANG**

One part of Orang (towards the north Silbori area) was dereserved in 1928 to settle cultivators from erstwhile East Bengal. The descendents of those migrants now dominate the fringes of the park and today, without their support and involvement, successful conservation is not possible. The first serious attempt to rope in local villagers was in the late 1990s when C. R. Bhubora joined as the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO). He and I would visit Orang together. We would visit fringe villages and speak with village heads and youth about the need to protect Orang. I was able to bring in an excellent ranger L. K. Ramchiari, who helped us organise awareness meets and cycle rallies with the participation of several agencies, including the local police as well! In time we managed to motivate a few ex-poachers to settle down and start small businesses such as grocery shops. This worked for a few years but the



DIRHITMAN MUKHERJEE



DR. ANWARUDDIN CHOUDHURY

Orang has a curious all-male population of wild elephants. Poaching, occasional infighting, old age and tiger predation (of calves and immature animals) are the principal causes of rhino mortality (above right) in Orang. With greater patrolling (left), poaching incidents are sure to reduce. The Rhino Foundation has been working with the Forest Department to provide guards with such essentials as motorcycles, all-weather clothing and patrol boots.

relationship that Bhobora and I maintained with fringe people was not sustained by subsequent managers.

Tourists often wonder why the diversity of larger mammals is relatively low in Orang. Of the many species that were once found here, over two centuries ago, including swamp deer, sambar, leopard, Red Junglefowl and Peafowl, vanished at the hands of settlers. And even after they left, Orang was cut off from forests that offered enough continuity for such wildlife to return. Experts are now suggesting that sambar from the over-populated Guwahati zoo be reintroduced to offer tigers sufficient prey, but such animals would clearly need very intensive veterinary clearances.

### THE NAME GAME

Around 2003-04, a new and unexpected problem hit Orang. The Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), an autonomous unit within Assam with virtually independent authority over forest and wildlife, was established in 2003. In the notification, several 'Orangs' were mentioned. A total lack of in depth geographical knowledge led some bureaucrats and foresters to confuse things terribly. Everybody concluded that the name 'Orang' should not exclude the famed national park and consequently, Orang National Park was part of BTC and part of the newly-created Udalguri district. However, the criteria of assigning villages / areas to BTC could not be completed in the case of Orang as doubts were cast on its legitimate inclusion as part of the

BTC. One effect of all this bungling was that salaries and transfer/posting of staff was delayed. It was a strange situation, on the ground we knew that the Orang National Park was outside Udalguri district, but on paper there was a question mark on its location. In the event, the BTC arranged to shift the headquarters of the park from Mangaldoi to Rowta and poachers, always quick to exploit an opportunity, began to take advantage. The Divisional Forest Office meanwhile became wrapped up in red tape, having to run for every petty matter to Kokrajhar, over 300 km. away. And if that failed, they had to go all the way to Guwahati, only to be informed that any place with 'Orang' in its name had to be referred to the BTC.

By 2007 I was posted back to the Environment and Forest Department as Joint Secretary. My masters degree in Geography now came to the rescue as I juxtaposed the map of the listed villages as part of the BTC with the government notification issued in October 2003. To weed out confusion about the many 'Orangs' I showed that the government notification included the Orangs under the Mazbat Assembly Constituency, while the Orang National Park fell under the Dalgaoon Assembly Constituency. Thus it had been excluded in the notification itself. I then pointed out the different Orangs – one on National Highway 52 (of the 'sweet' fame), another Orang tea garden and yet another near the tea garden, known as Orang N.C. (non-cadestral) or Orang Bagan N.C. These were

inside the BTC... Orang National Park was not. In fact, the park is nowhere *near* any of the other established Orangs. Duly resolved, the park headquarters that had been partially moved to Rowta was returned to Mangaldoi and the Treasury of the Darrang district was instructed to clear all salary and other outstanding bills relating to the park. After much trauma, control of the Orang National Park has now been returned to the state government.

### THE FUTURE

Wildlife management progress in Orang is still slow, but I firmly believe that the park can bounce back if we remain collectively committed. The way forward is clear:

1. Reestablish the anti-poaching mechanisms that had been piloted by Talukdar.
2. Rekindle associations with local communities.
3. Impress upon the powers that be in the state government that Orang National Park is a biodiversity jewel.

If we succeed in doing this, Orang could well turn out to be one of the best examples of community conservation, where locals not only benefit from the park, but also enjoy the goodwill and profits from their involvement in its protection. I know Assam well and believe Orang could offer a source population of tigers safe sanctuary. This would surely bring in much-needed revenue from tourism that could be pumped back into the reserve and could enrich the local community. The idea is hypnotic and I have the fullest belief that this win-win can and will be accomplished. 🐘