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GAME SANCTUARIES IN BURMA (PRE-1942)
WITH PRESENT STATUS OF RHINOCEROS AND THAMIN

BY

LIEUT.-COL. R. W. BURTON, I.A. (Retd.)

(With two plates)

Prior to the Japanese invasion and the subsequent grant of independent status to Burma, early in 1948, there were several Game Sanctuaries in the 50,000 square miles of Government Forest in that country; and the total area under forest was about 240,000 square miles.

There was the Shwe-u-daung Sanctuary of about 81 square miles of mostly hilly country in the Momeik and Mogok Forest Divisions in Upper Burma; the Kahilu Game Sanctuary of 62 square miles in the Thaton and Salween Forest Divisions of Lower Burma; the two sanctuaries of Maymyo and the Moscos Islands which were merely wild bird refuges of 49 and 19 square miles respectively; and the Pidoung Sanctuary here described.

THE VANISHING RHINOCEROS

The position of the three Asiatic species of rhinoceros in the above sanctuaries and elsewhere was fully discussed and brought up to date (1947) by Ansell [Vol. 47 (2) pp. 249-276], his conclusion being that *R. sondaicus* had become virtually extinct in Burma, also in Malaya, Siam, Sumatra, Java and Borneo: while as to *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* the lowest reasonable estimate was 21 animals in Burma, and perhaps as many as 45.

In view of the present state of law and order in Burma, and other eastern countries where the rhinoceros has hitherto existed, it can be safely conjectured that the species *sondaicus* is virtually extinct, and that *sumatrensis* may not survive beyond the present century. So we have the sad prospect of two more species being added to the many which have vanished from the world almost within living memory.

RHINOCEROS UNICORNIS

The preservation of this species rests with India and Nepal. In his article, 'Wild Life Reserves in India: Assam.' E. P. Gee [J.B.N.H.S., Vol. 49, (1)] gives an estimate of the number of rhinoceros now existing in this country, based on the Society's report to the International Union for the Protection of Nature in 1949.

If the estimate of 50 for Nepal is near the actual figure then there has been a great diminution there of the species within the past forty years. A sportsman fishing in the Rapti river wrote on the 25th May 1909:—

'My principal fun was going out on an elephant photographing rhino . . . They are simply in swarms; I counted twenty within a

mile of my camp, and I did not go into the good ground. There were ten big ones in a small piece of grass not more than 5 acres in extent.' [*J.B.N.H.S.*, Vol. 19 (3) pp. 747.]

A reliable census of the number of rhinoceros in Nepal at the present time would be of great interest. In the reference quoted above it is also authentically stated:—

'The rhinoceros is found in the Nepal Terai, in Morang, north of Purnea, on the Kosi at Patharghatta, on the banks of the Bagmati north of Muzaffarpur, and as stated by Mr. Lydekker, it is even more numerous still farther to the west in the Chitwan and Naolpur valleys along the banks of the Gandak and the Rapti rivers . . . In spite of the numbers of rhino which were killed in January 1907 (there was a big shoot and twenty-eight rhinos were shot and six calves caught) the forests in Chitwan are still so full of them that no appreciable diminution in the stock has been made.'

RHINOCEROS SONDAICUS

At page 266 of his article Ansell remarks:—

'Regarding the existence of the species in other countries, I feel that the Sundarbans of S. Bengal may offer a little hope, though little is known about the number of rhinoceros, if any, that exist there today. Rhinoceros in this area, if any exist, would almost certainly be *sondaicus* as in all the available records no specimen of either *R. unicornis* or *D. sumatrensis* has been recorded from the area.'

In reference to the above the excellent article by Vicomte Edmond de Poncins, 'A Hunting Trip in the Sunderbunds in 1892.' [*J.B.N.H.S.*, Vol. 37, No 4 (1935).] is of considerable interest and value.

Besides much that is of interest to the sportsman-naturalist and the general reader, is the account of how he spent days and days tracking and observing the habits of the few *Rhinoceros sondaicus* which were to be found at that time on islands 165, 169, 170, 171, 172:—

'The rhinos lived there for one reason. In the middle of this jungle there was sweet water.'

Edmond de Poncins was obviously a reliable observer. He did not kill, or fire at even one of the animals:—

' . . . finally I got a glimpse of a strange profile at a very short distance. For the first and, I am sorry to say, the last time in my life I saw that long, grey, hornless head and everything was explained: these rhinos were *R. sondaicus*, they had no trophy worth having, and shooting them was without excuse.

What has become of the Sunderbund rhinos now (1935) in spite of the extreme difficulty involved in their pursuit? They were then very few: I am certain of three, I consider that a fourth is probable, and that six is the maximum. They are probably shot out. Even when I was there, poaching was rife in the Sunderbunds.'

It is probable that not very long after 1892 the species will have been exterminated in the Sundarbans—and everywhere in India, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts where there might at that time have been a few of them. So of the three rhinoceroses of Asia it is only the *Rhinoceros unicornis* of India which is likely to survive into the next century: except perhaps for a few specimens in zoological

gardens, as *sumatrensis* has been known to attain the age of 47 years in captivity.

Members interested in the status of the rhinoceros in Asia may see the list of references at end of this article.

THE PIDOUNG GAME SANCTUARY IN 1930

Of all the game sanctuaries in Burma, the Pidoung Sanctuary in the Myitkyina Forest Division of Upper Burma was alone suited for purposes of photography and observation of the wild life it contained, for it was readily accessible. It extended on both sides of the railway running for twenty miles through the area and was provided with a bungalow not far from the railway station about twelve miles from Myitkyina.

It was in May 1930 that the writer visited the Pidoung Sanctuary with the kind assistance of the then Game Warden of Burma, Mr. H. C. Smith, who made all camp arrangements, provided two riding elephants, and guided me and a Government Officer who was just beginning wild life photography so that we could see the sanctuary and its denizens under the best possible conditions. Things may have greatly changed since then so it will be best to continue in the present tense from notes made at the time.¹

The area notified by the Government of Burma as the sanctuary comprises 260 square miles of forest country. There are hills and valleys, thick evergreen forests and more open jungle; while north of the railway station are rolling downs, bare of trees, in the hollows of which are dense thickets, also long winding green valleys filled with lush grass.

In this part of the sanctuary there is excellent stalking ground, so that the photographer who is so fortunate as to be under the skilful guidance of the Game Warden can obtain opportunities for beautiful and interesting pictures with whatever kind of camera he may possess. Care has to be taken not to alarm the game which is not yet wholly without fear of man. In time the animals will be as tame as fallow deer in the beautiful Parks of England, or the animals in the National Parks of America and other countries. Indeed, one need not go so far away as that to enjoy the sight of wild animals without fear of man, for in a quite small sanctuary in a Central India State the writer has seen sambar and other game of those parts literally as tame as village cattle; and in the Yala Sanctuary in Ceylon are animals almost as tame.

Here, at Pidoung, the present scribe, a humble wielder of a Kodak, managed to take several reasonably good pictures of a herd of grazing bison and one of a bull *saing*. But for the dull light and cloudy sky the bison photos might have been considerably better. It is during the months of April and May that the habits of bison and *saing* bring these splendid animals into the open to graze on the short green grass and be free as possible from the swarms of biting and stinging insects

¹ Shortly we hope to publish an up-to-date account of the Pidoung and other game sanctuaries to be supplied by the present Chief Conservator of Forests of independent Burma.—EDS.

which so plague them at that season. *Saing* are the wild cattle of Burma, and of Malaya, where they are called *Banting*. They are also found on a number of islands of the Malayan Archipelago, even as far away as Borneo.

The bulls are massive animals attaining a height of nearly 17 hands, and vary in colour from a khaki dun to a dark brown and almost black. For everything concerning them, and the hunting of them, Peacock (20) should be seen. Bison bulls are, as we all know, huge animals of enormous strength which attain a height of over nineteen hands and a weight of more than 2,000 lb., yet these great animals fall victims to the tiger. We saw in the sanctuary the carcass of a recently slain grand old bull bison with rugged horns. He had been done to death by a large tiger which had hamstrung the noble beast by slashing the hind legs with his claws. It was seemingly useless destruction, for only a portion of the tail had been eaten.

One should make as early a start as possible; although when the day is cloudy and a strong breeze blowing animals may be seen at almost any hour of the day. Sambar and hog-deer are in considerable numbers, but it is the bison and *saing* which form the chief attraction in the more open places. The sambar are shy, and it is mostly by chance that a photograph is obtained when stalking time is somewhat limited. The hog-deer are more easy to stalk, being frequently found in the grassy hollows, where there are bushes and clumps of high reeds. But to get really good pictures of the deer it would be better to watch in a 'hide' over a pool of water during the hot hours of the day. It was on the hog-deer ground that the Game Warden showed the place where he was standing when a tiger, crossing at a right angle fifty yards away, suddenly obtained the scent of the hated human and instantly, without looking for the cause, turned left and went away at speed. That is a clear instance that a tiger has more scenting power than many sportsmen realize.

THE MANAW SALT-LICK

There are two 'licks', much frequented by animals, at which there are machans in large trees. There, if one is fortunate, bison, *saing* sambar, hog-deer, and smaller animals and birds may be seen amid their natural surroundings, all unaware of the watching eyes and clicking cameras. It was when we were approaching the Manaw 'lick' at about half-past eight that the keen eye of the Warden detected movement ahead. Down we all sat. The cameraman—as the soon-to-be expert possessor of three instruments—telescopic, movie, and stereoscopic, may be designated—had already begun to get his bags of tricks into working order in anticipation of work at the lick: so by the time the bull *saing* had got to within about a hundred yards, almost all movement had ceased. But the wary eyes had detected some movements among our party. The grand beast stopped and stared, the while we examined him through our field glasses. Wandering through the forests in which he had been so long unmolested he had not that fear of man which, in other surroundings, would have caused him to clear out on the first suspicion of danger.

Slowly he came on, and several times he stopped to have another look. His great depth from the withers to the girth was very notice-

able, and his muzzle had the appearance of being circled by a white ring. He was grizzled between the horns which curved upwards and inwards, being about twenty-six inches in length. His white stockings, white from above the knee downwards, as are those of the bison, were conspicuous. The outer aspect of the upper part of his forelegs was dark, tending towards black, and his general colouring rather dark khaki. A grand beast indeed is a bull *saing* in the prime of his life.

Much photographed he was during those long minutes when he stood at gaze or slowly paced along. The humble effort of the Kodak is before you (plate). He presented the appearance of a prize Hereford bull. Suddenly he got our wind. Quick and active as a deer he turned and galloped away his white buttocks flashing among the trees.

B I S O N A N D S A I N G

On several occasions we observed *saing* at close quarters in the more open country. One herd that we stalked and photographed consisted of twenty animals: a fine herd bull, two threequarter grown ones, and a two-year old; the others were cows and calves of various ages. Lovely groups the animals made as they browsed about on the open downland, some of them lying close to one another in placid cattle-like content.

To approach this herd we had to disturb a sentinel cow. Very alert she was, and after being photographed by the cameraman got our wind as we advanced under cover of a fold in the ground and made off with a snort of alarm to join the herd. It was curious that her companions did not take alarm: perhaps it was not *that* kind of snort! They merely went on as before grazing and lying down and moving slowly about. It was evident they trusted more to their noses than their eyes; but when hunting these animals early in that year in the dry zone of lower Burma the writer found their eyes to be almost as good as their noses. The cows of the Magwe country were a rich chestnut while those at Pidoung were of a light dun colour.

The bison were more easy of approach than the *saing*. We made a very successful stalk of thirty-seven animals. Just as the stalk was about to commence, a fine bull, probably the same beast we had chanced upon and disturbed twenty minutes previously, paced slowly across our front to join the grazing animals.

This was the cameraman's first essay at animal photography and he obtained good results with all three cameras. So you can imagine the opportunity we had. The Kodak was pretty successful, as you see; and when that old cow spied the bold amateur photographer rudely taking pictures of her she merely snorted and advanced for a closer view, while the intruder crept quickly away to avoid giving further alarm. It was after that, when the cameraman returned to take movie pictures, that he found the herd in the same place and also obtained a 'shot' at a herd of *saing* which emerged from a nearby strip of forest. Fortunate cameraman! This was his first sight of those animals and his first effort at animal photography. Many more exciting stalks and good pictures will reward his future efforts at Pidoung.

TIGERS AND BEARS

On all the game trails we saw numerous 'scratchings' of tiger, also some fresh tracks. Along a path through a thick belt of jungle—the 'Tiger Walk' we called it—were scratchings innumerable, and many of the trees had marks of claws on them. On the trunk of one large tree was the unusual sight of both tiger and bear clawing, the latter ascending high up the trunk where could be seen hanging under a branch the wild bees' comb which had attracted his sense of smell, for he has a keen nose for such a delicacy as honey.

The tigers destroy much game, and steps are being taken to reduce their number. Already the stock of hog-deer is largely diminished, and this extensive area of forest could support many more animals than are in it; but everything must have a beginning and the sanctuary is but a few years established.

Near the Manaw lick several trees had in them platforms made of branches broken off by black bears—the Himalayan Bear (*Selenaroctos thibetanus*)—during the previous rainy season. A photograph taken showed how one side of a tree had been stripped of its branches. This 'nest' was quite a large one, as on the ground are a number of branches since blown down by the high winds. The number of this species of bear in the sanctuary is estimated as sixteen.

ELEPHANTS

The elephants, of which there are about 140 in the sanctuary, stay mostly in the evergreen forest, so are not often seen. No doubt anyone wishing to take pictures of these beasts could manage to do so as there are sure to be suitable glades, and 'salt licks' also. There would have to be a considerable stock of patience and ample time would also be necessary.

As we were unable to obtain photographs of wild elephants we had to be content with the tame ones which bathed in a pool for our special benefit. The surroundings are perfectly natural. One small tusker was without an attendant, and seemed highly pleased at his second bath that day, as he remained mostly submerged, now and again only the tip of his trunk appearing above the surface to take air to his lungs.

BIRDS AND SNAKES

The sanctuary can show birds of many species. The harsh call of the Chinese Francolin is often heard, and the bird occasionally flushed as one wanders about in the early morning. The Burmese Peafowl is both seen and heard, and it is noticed that the call is not quite the same as that of the Indian peacock. Among the several kinds of quail is seen the tiny Button Quail of which Burma has two species. The Peacock Pheasant lives amongst the evergreen; Whistling Teal and other wildfowl are on the quiet pools of many a stream winding through the dense forests. From all the thickets comes the call of the Red Junglefowl.

The Green Imperial Pigeon is seen. One of these fine birds flew off the scanty platform of twigs which satisfies the species as a



Bull Tsaing or Banteng (*Bibos banteng*)



Photos

Author

A herd of Gaur (*Bibos gaurus*)



Photos

Col. C. H. Stockley

The Brow-antlered Deer or Thamin (*Panolia eldi*)

nest, and looking up we could see one of her eggs through the interstices of the flimsy structure. A very beautiful bird, the Burmese Red-billed Blue Magpie, was also disturbed off her nest by the side of 'Tiger Walk'.

Everywhere in the jungles of Burma the nest of a species of ant is conspicuous in the tress. It is a curious round, or oblong, affair looking like a black cellular *papier-mache* football. Some of them are much larger than that. They are seen in parts of India also. They are built in the fork of branches, or just around a stem, and in substance are very tough, for in spite of their size they are extremely light and withstand much rough usage. In many of these nests is seen the round hole indicating that the Siam Rufous Woodpecker is, or was, nesting there. It seems that this species always nests in these structures, cutting a tunnel in the usual woodpecker fashion to the centre and there laying the eggs. A live nest is always chosen so that the bird and its brood has food ready to hand, a very excellent board and lodging arrangement for the woodpeckers. What the ants think of it we do not know! A photograph of a typical nest was taken.

One morning we flushed a pipit from her nest in the deep impress made by a *saing's* hoof when the ground was soft. The bird had chosen wisely. In the morning some of the sun's rays would warm the nest which would later on be in the shade. There were three eggs, one of them much lighter than the other two, so perhaps some parasitic cuckoo had also viewed this little nest out in the open plain.

A snake of brilliant hues was killed on a path near the camp. The main colour was coral red, and when tapped on the back with a stick it formed a white corkscrew of the underpart and end of its tail. No doubt this habit is a means of protection, as it was repeated every time the reptile was touched. The snake was apparently McClelland's Coral Snake introduced to scientific notice by Reinhardt in 1844 and named by him in honour of Mr. J. McClelland, a member of the Indian Forest Department of that period. (Wall, *J.B.H.N.S.*, Vol. 25, p. 628.)

Pythons are met with in the evergreen—how is it that we have no recorded instance of a human being having been swallowed by a python in India¹?—and the dreaded hamadryad is not at all rare, so we were told. In the pools are large water monitors, some of them nearly six feet in length. One which was recently killed by the Game Warden had consumed no less than 41 frogs for his breakfast!

We left the camp, which was about five miles from the railway station after four delightful days. In early May the more open parts of the jungle are scented by the yellow blossom of a species of small tree (*Wendlandia tinctoria*) and amongst the undergrowth are several kinds of conspicuous creamy-white flowers. The foliage of trees has assumed that more vivid green which is a presage of the coming rainy season, so all the birds are joyfully singing and twittering among the leaves.

¹ Perhaps they don't!—EDS

From the high ground above the Forest Rest House we take our farewell view of the comparatively level country over which we have been wandering in search of the wild life we had come to see, while in the distance are the evergreen hills, the impregnable retreat of the animals from the all destroying hand of man. Would that there could be more inviolate game sanctuaries maintained through the will of the people to protect the larger animals of Eastern countries; for in these days of destruction there is much need for all peoples and all nations to be reminded how valuable but irreplaceable are the fast vanishing wild animals which it is an inherited duty to maintain for posterity.

B R O W - A N T L E R E D D E E R

There were no *Thamin* in the Pidoung Sanctuary; perhaps they were introduced later, and before 1942? In any case none will have there survived.

In 1930 it was well recognized that unless adequately protected in one or more sanctuaries the Burmese race of *thamin* would become extinct within quite a few years. The fate of the race—*Panolia eldi platyceros* of countries further east—there were, for instance, many of these deer in parts of Indo-China in 1947—can be imagined.

Pocock designates the Burmese race of this deer as *Panolia eldi thamin* Thomas, while he considers the Manipur race the nominate *Panolia eldi eldi* McClelland.

During the 1914 War the *thamin* in Woburn Abbey park which had been imported by the Duke of Bedford unfortunately died out; so there are none in England now (1950).

Early in 1949 the present writer put forward through the Society a concrete suggestion for the importation of the *thamin* deer of Burma into Assam. Nothing came of that.

On the 9th November 1949 it was in the Wireless News that the Burma-Assam Road via Manipur would be in use by the middle of February 1950, so a renewal of the suggestion was made and copies of the correspondence sent to the Department of Scientific Research, New Delhi, on the 30th January 1950. The suggestion was passed to the Government of Assam and also brought to the notice of the International Union for the Protection of Nature, Brussels. Up to time of writing, December 1950, no positive action has been taken anywhere. Maybe the Governments of India and Assam are saying that the Burma race of this deer need not be 'saved' since the species exists in Manipur.

It would seem, however, that the Manipur race is also on the very verge of extinction! It is evident that, unless the authorities and departments concerned get speedily busy, nothing will be effected, and these beautiful deer will vanish from both India (Manipur) and Burma—and the world. It is indeed a sad reflection that when the writer was in Burma in 1891, *thamin* were in their thousands, and are now close to vanishing point.

'Where there is a Will there is a Way' is a good old saying; and another which is apposite to the situation is 'tempus fugit' for, as time goes on, the surmountable difficulties will grow worse and not better, as we can all very well see for ourselves. Some will be saying that

the saving from extinction of a few deer is a very small matter in these tremendous times. But is it so small a matter that a species should be negligibly allowed to vanish from creation?

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