

OUTRAGE In INDIA

By Erwin A. Bauer

Photos by author

The golden Indian twilight was blending slowly into dusk. I squirmed uncomfortably inside a rattan blind, high in the crown of a sal tree. Insects whined around my ears, but otherwise the world was deathly quiet. Time passed in slow motion. No evening breeze blew. I was hungry and thirsty from too long a vigil in too cramped a perch. Still, some sixth sense warned that I was no longer alone.

No jays or rhesus monkeys chat-

tered shrill warnings of intrusion as they often do. No twigs cracked to betray an animal's approach. I could still see the carcass of an old black buffalo staked as bait on the ground below. When the first symptoms of buck fever had vanished, I decided that my sixth sense was really a false alarm, so I relaxed. Deciding to leave the blind, I reached for a handhold on a limb. In that same split second, a tiger was suddenly crouching beside the buffalo as if flashed there by a slide projector onto a dark screen.

As I watched in disbelief, the

tiger began tearing flesh from the buffalo's flank. But the loudest sound I could hear was my own pulse pounding, not the tiger crunching bone.

As carefully as possible, I raised my camera. With unsteady hands, I tried to focus on the tiger through the telephoto lens, but it was now too dark. I couldn't clearly find the target in the gathering gloom. Then, as abruptly as it had appeared, the big yellow cat turned to stare directly up at me, seemed to hesitate and then evaporated into the forest. That was the end of it.

Maharajas made hunting as comfortable as possible for their guests, often deploying elephants and thousands of beaters.



Painting by W. Daniell, R.A. *The Oriental Annual*, 1836.



*Its Game Populations Once Flourished.
Today they flounder.*

Night completely fell before I was calm and collected enough to climb down from the tree, much older than when I had climbed into it.

That encounter in Central India several winters ago, brief as it was, remains high among the most memorable of my life. I have been lucky enough to hunt with gun or camera many of the great game trophies on earth, but that was the first tiger I had ever seen outside a zoo. I can still see that splendid creature today. Unfortunately *Panthera tigris* is a species which fewer and fewer outdoorsmen will ever be able to encounter in the wild, even in a national park or game refuge. And still more sadly, that is the fate of much wildlife on the subcontinent of India today.

There was a time, within this century, when India contained one of the richest, most varied wildlife communities in the world. Vast herds of hooved animals rivaled the number and variety now found on eastern and southern African plains. Among these were many handsome and unique species found nowhere else on earth. There was a strange antelope with four horns, for example, another antelope which barked and a rhino with just one horn. However, game is not nearly that abundant today.

Already extinct are the Indian cheetah, the hispid hare and the pink-headed duck. Either extinct or nearly so are the pygmy hog, the great Indian bustard, the red goral and Nilghiri tahr. The list of rare or very endangered species is much too long. It includes the barasinga, a magnificent, elk-size swamp deer of which about 150 remain, the dhole or wild dog, the brow-antlered deer (maybe 50 survive), the onager or wild ass, the snow leopard, the clouded leopard, the Asian lion (Less than 150 of them are left.), the hangul or Kashmir stag, the chinkara or Indian gazelle, the gaur and the Indian buffalo of which few of pure wild stock exist. There are now more blackbucks living in each of several counties of Texas than in all of India. The number of Indian one-horned rhinos is down to about 500, with half of these living in Nepal. Today's Bengal tiger population is estimated to be 2,000 to 3,000, down from approximately 150,000 less than 50 years ago. Altogether, it is a



India's exploding human population coupled with poaching, erosion and the expansion of the great western desert are taking a heavy toll on that country's wildlife. Even in game sanctuaries, Indian buffaloes and other wildlife still slide toward oblivion.

sad and ugly picture.

It is easy to blame the deplorable situation on excessive shooting, because shooting *has* indeed been excessive. For instance, it is difficult, if not actually impossible, for the modern American sportsman to comprehend the vast shoots held as recently as early in this century. These were organized by Indian royalty for any royal guests or VIPs who wanted to shoot some birds or animals as comfortably and conveniently as possible, with no slogging through swamps or deep snow banks. A single Indian operation often employed thousands of beaters (drivers) on foot and hundreds riding on elephants which drove game of all sorts past hunters in plush blinds with whole batteries of guns. Planning was on the scale of a major military operation. The toll was huge, and most of the big game within several square miles might be slaughtered during a single coordinated drive. Britain's King

Sambar deer and other big game animals were slaughtered by the thousands on elaborate hunts organized by the maharajas.



George V killed 39 tigers alone during a single hunt in 1911.

Some of the early tiger shikars (shoots) sponsored by maharajas and other princes of India were costly, gross extravaganzas that even modern millionaires or motion picture producers couldn't imagine. Near a selected hunting site, a great forest area would be totally cleared to pitch a small city of tents for honored guests. Guards patrolled the perimeter. Oriental tapestries covered the floors, and silk curtains hung inside. Just beyond the main compound, a bustling, smoky bazaar soon appeared to provide for the small army of beaters, servants and camp followers.

A simple shikar pre-hunt banquet, served for hours with sitar music and dusky dancers, would include curried wild boar, young peacock breasts, venison pilau, broiled partridges and spiced waterfowl. If Europeans were among the guests, the finest champagne and brandy would flow freely. During some shikars in northern India, ice was actually transported from the Himalayas by bullock cart to chill the beverages and the sweets.



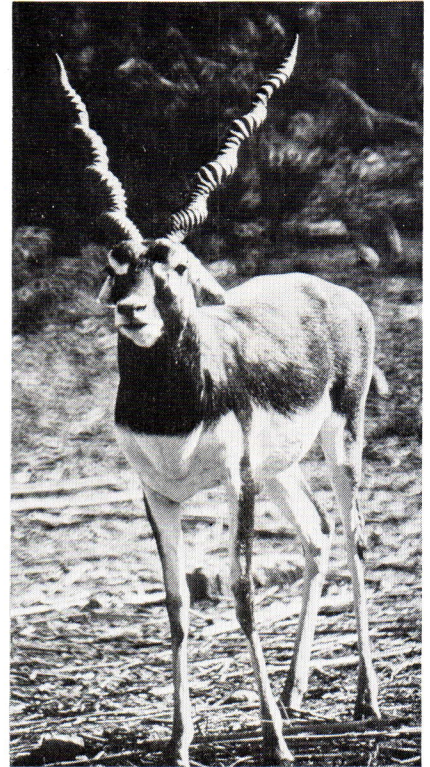
In his memoirs, revealed only a few years ago, the Maharaja of Surguja noted modestly that his own total bag of tigers stood only at 1,150 and therefore set no records. One can only imagine how many other animals from leopards to nilghai were bagged during these shoots. The Maharani of Jaipur had shot 25 tigers by the time she was 25 years old. On a 1970 visit to the palace of the Maharaja of Wankaner in Gujarat, I found the royal trophy rooms wall-to-wall carpeted with tiger skins, not all being from trophy animals. One English Army officer stationed in India claimed to have shot over 300 lions, 50 of these near New Delhi. Today at Bhartpur, India's finest waterfowl sanctuary, there survives a plaque for all to see. It commemorates past hunts when many thousands of ducks were shot there in a single day's time. The hunters included Viceroys of India, British politicians and a number of American names well-known in the 1940s.

Still, all of this shooting — and I have only mentioned a few typical examples here — does not account for the low state of India's wildlife today. Regulated shooting rarely does because wildlife is a renewable resource. Given suitable habitat in which to live, most species will at least survive, if not prosper, and India is no exception.

During the peaceful 1930s, British administrators had the time and foresight to become concerned about the rapidly dwindling wildlife of India. Some sanctuaries, especially for tigers, were set aside in critical areas. The number of Asian lions had fallen to a low point of only 12 — the very edge of extinction — when Lord Curzon (the Viceroy of India) pressured the Nawab of Junagadh (on whose land the lions survived) to stop all hunting. This resulted in the population increasing to about 300 in 1955. For the first time in India's history, shooting restrictions were published, although we now know that these were not always rigidly enforced because of too few game wardens. Still, this new concern by the British gave wildlife, especially the two big cats, a new lease on life.

Undoubtedly the final decline in India's rich wildlife heritage began with independence from Great

Britain in 1947. Very often, such governmental change-overs elsewhere have been disastrous to wildlife and the environment in general. India was no exception. Refuges and shooting regulations established by the British were considered forms of colonial oppression and were ignored. At the same time, a serious famine was sweeping India, so the new government



There are currently more blackbucks living in each of several counties in Texas than in all of India put together.

issued arms and ammo freely to farmers to "protect" their farms from wild animals. It is easy to guess what followed. Any wildlife appearing near cultivation was doomed, even though those same Hindu farmers would not move a muscle to save the same crops from their own cattle which are considered sacred. For many years, the slaughter of game has gone on unchecked. It is far from under control right now.

No sport or trophy hunting is permitted in India today. The major wildlife conservation effort by the government, subsidized in part by several international wildlife organizations, is in the maintenance of a system of several national parks and sanctuaries — Kanha,

continued on pg. 80

Outrage In India

continued from pg. 41

Kaziranga, Corbett, Mudumulai, Manas, Periyar and Palamau. Most are focused squarely on saving the tiger. None are very large wildlife areas by North American or African standards. But they are beautiful places to visit and offer virtually the only reasonable chance to see many native birds and animals — or to actually see small segments of the true, undisturbed India of the past.

There is trouble even in and around these few sanctuaries. While exploring both by Land Rover and on elephant around the fringes of Kanha Park (where I saw that first tiger), I noticed that the chital or spotted deer and the huge gaurs were extremely wary and hard to approach. That is unusual in a preserve which has long been set aside as a sanctuary. But sitting on the veranda of the guest house that evening, I discovered — or rather heard — the reason — two volleys of rifle shots coming from an area where no shooting at all was legal.

The same situation was true at Ranthambor, a small sanctuary where the sambar deer were as wild as the whitetails on the last day of the Pennsylvania buck season. Most of the shooting, poaching really, is aimed at the various deer and antelope by local residents who desperately want the protein. But that is only part of the problem. Poaching rhinos just for their horns which are ground up and sold as aphrodisiac is never ending wherever the big beasts live. Just as serious is poaching of the great cats — the leopards, lions and tigers.

Asian lions once roamed from the Mediterranean region, across Turkey, Iraq, Israel and Saudi Arabia into Iran, India and Afghanistan, in some places being very plentiful. Today, they cling to survival in just one place, the Gir Forest of Gujarat, India. There they are under siege by local residents who now use a deadly technique. The bodies of dead goats or cattle are laced with pesticides which are banned in the U.S. but are easily available from the U.S. in rural Indian markets. After lions eat the baits, they die slowly and painfully. Tigers are sought and poisoned elsewhere in

the same manner because their exquisite striped skins are even more valuable on the international market than are the plain, tawny lion hides. It is never difficult, by exploring the back alleys of Calcutta and Bombay, to find tiger hides for sale. The price is high, but the product is available.

Still one problem looms above all the rest — in fact causes all the rest — in this deepening tragedy of India's wildlife. It is the already-too-high human population which continues to explode.

Population densities average about 1200 people per square mile in the Ganges Basin. That number will likely double by about the year 2000. Then life will be intolerable. Almost an equal number of cattle wander unmolested about the countryside, grazing to bare earth anything that is green, yet spared from being butchered by religious beliefs. Very little forest land remains in India, and most of that is either overgrazed or degraded, even in some national parks and sanctuaries. Erosion and the great western desert are moving inexorably eastward from Pakistan, another impoverished country. Tigers and wildlife cannot survive on such land, and neither can humans.

But why be concerned about what happens to wildlife on the opposite side of the world? After all, even in the good old days of open seasons, only the wealthiest among us could hunt tigers or gaur or rhinos in India. Why write about the dismal subject at all?

The answer is simple and clear-cut. The tragedy of India's wildlife should be a lesson — a loud, dramatic warning — to all of us, but especially to American hunters.

Far too often we ignore the same subtle warnings right at home. When a forest or a wilderness is allowed to vanish for temporary profit or no good, sound reason at all, that is hunting territory and wildlife habitat lost forever. It is a threat far more serious, especially when multiplied all across the land, than all the lunatics with their anti-hunting bills. The right to hunt isn't so important when there is nowhere to hunt anyway. And the tragedy of India's wildlife could also be ours unless we are better guardians of our land in the future. ■