

Here: the red deer is the UK's largest wild land mammal and over 25,000 occur within the national park on moorland and

ON THE SHOULDERS of giants

An elephant-back safari is the ultimate way to explore Kaziranga National Park, one of eastern India's last, great wildernesses – and home to the world's largest population of one-horned rhino, writes Nick Garbutt

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In the half-light of dawn it wasn't easy to distinguish between land and air.



Up here in the Jurassic grandness of the Cairngorms massif, life is filled with a harsh beauty: the single red eyebrow of a ptarmigan

Clockwise from here: the ptarmigan's plumage changes according to season, white in winter, grey-brown in summer; goshawk are adept at hunting in woodland; nature photographer Peter Cairns rallies the troops; the Cairngorms is one of the last UK strongholds of the red squirrel

A pale grey wispy mist hung over the marsh we were heading towards: it molded to the contours of the tall grass and shapes beneath like dustsheets draped over long abandoned belongings.

Only the ghost-like forms of taller trees protruded above the clutches of the mist. From my lofty vantage point on the back of an elephant I could make out a trail of sorts that we were following into the murk, along with two other elephants carrying tourists and photographers.

Despite having been introduced to my pachyderm bush taxi only half an hour before, I already felt a connection with the lumbering giant beneath me (although I doubt the feeling was mutual). The elephant's indolent swaggering gait and rhythmical munching of the vegetation she plucked and uprooted along the way was instantly soothing and dispelled any apprehension about my seemingly precarious position.

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I was in Kaziranga National Park in Assam, one of India's finest wildernesses and wildlife areas, and the last major stronghold of the Indian one-horned rhino. Early morning elephant rides are arguably the best and certainly the most evocative way to explore the park. However, as we lurched, elephantine step by elephantine step, further into the swamp, the mist thickened and visibility became poorer – and I struggled to imagine seeing anything unless we literally walked into it.

But that's one of the first things you notice about watching wildlife from the back of an elephant – other wildlife behaves as if you're not there – and it is possible to get incredibly close to all manner of animals. To them you're just another creature that they're accustomed to seeing every day (there is a healthy population of wild elephants in Kaziranga too) and not a vehicle for human intruders. So as light levels improved I became aware of small dark shapes darting for cover in the grass beneath



the elephant's legs. It was a herd of hog deer, a species common in the forests and wetlands across the Indo-Gangetic Plain and so named after its swine-like posture and way of running.

By now we were deep into the tall grass, so tall in fact that I could barely see above it in some places, despite being on top of an elephant, and my legs were quickly saturated as we pushed through the dense tangles heavily laden with morning dew. A short distance ahead I could make out the shape of a large grey rock, but as we approached closer my perceptions changed. A head came up, its little ears twitched and there was an unmistakable loud snort. It was of course a rhino.

I'd been privileged enough to see the rhinos in Kaziranga before (and also in Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal – the species' other stronghold), but each time I've seen them my first impression has always been of something verging on the prehistoric – their extravagant folds of impenetrable-looking, riveted skin appearing like armour-plating only able to articulate at the joints.

By now we were so close the myopic rhino knew full well it wasn't alone and swiveled around quickly to face us. It sniffed at the damp air, but nothing set its alarm bells ringing, so it turned slowly and trotted a few steps further away giving a couple of indignant huffs for good measure. It then stopped motionless in an instant, as if struck by some unseen force.

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My elephant stopped too and let out a low but audible rumble. I could feel its skin and muscles quiver beneath me. The mahawat (elephant rider) tried to urge it forwards but the elephant refused. There was another deep elephant rumble, then a blood-curdling growl and roar. My elephant trumpeted and lunged dramatically in the opposite direction. The rhino snorted furiously and set off at pace, violently parting the elephant grass as it ploughed through. I clung to the howdah (elephant saddle) and tried to turn to see where the noise had come from, while the mahawat struggled to regain full control of the elephant. The two nearby elephants were also trumpeting, with their occupants similarly holding on tight. We circled around a couple of times, the mahawats frantically searching the vicinity. Someone called across from another elephant, "did you see it? Did you see it?" "No," I said, "see what?" "It was a tiger, I caught a glimpse of a tiger," the lady replied.

As systematically as possible the three elephants criss-crossed the area, hoping there might be another glimpse, but after five minutes it was clear the tiger had given us the slip. My mahawat turned around and told me, "I was very lucky," I couldn't help adding in my mind, "to be alive?" although I knew full well there had not really been any serious danger. But in the heat of the moment, with the adrenaline pumping, it's hard to stop the mind racing away with all manner of worse-case scenarios. Wandering into a tiger certainly isn't a regular occurrence in Kaziranga, so it was understandable that the mahawats were excited, even if the rest of us were slightly more perplexed and bemused.

Kaziranga actually boasts one of the highest densities of →

tigers among any protected area and was declared an official Tiger Reserve in 2006. At the last count there were estimated to be between 90 and 100 tigers in the park and its immediate surroundings. But despite this, Kaziranga is not a park that is renowned for its tiger sightings. The habitat here is just too dense, with so much of the park inaccessible that it's not conducive to being able to see the animals with any predictability or regularity. Visitors go to Kaziranga expecting to see rhinos and elephants, but only in the vague hope they might catch a glimpse of a tiger. Despite the odds I was lucky enough to see my first ever wild tiger in Kaziranga in 1994; the briefest of sightings late one evening as it turned off a forest track and melted effortlessly into the undergrowth.

After the excitement had subsided, we were able to continue at a more normal sedate pace and resume our search for rhinos. Light levels had improved and the mist had lifted so spotting them was not at all difficult – several were actually out grazing on the edge of the tall elephant grass and over the remaining half hour of the ride we saw at least seven or eight rhinos.

One male had a deep bleeding gash on his back side, almost certainly the aftermath of a recent fight with another male. Dominant males can be very aggressive towards intruders and fights are often violent and occasionally fatal. Deep wounds are inflicted not by the horn, but instead by tusk-like lower incisors that gouge and slash at opponents.

Kaziranga National Park nestles on the banks of the

The hare who decides that 10 photographers rustling around her like squirrels in a cereal packet is not incommensurate



HORN OF PLENTY The decline and recovery of Kaziranga's one-horned rhinos

Historically, the Indian one-horned rhino, was abundant across a swathe of territory known as the Terai, which largely corresponds to the alluvial grasslands and marshes associated with the major river systems in the northern part of Indian subcontinent (primarily the Brahmaputra, Ganges and Indus Rivers).

However, excessive hunting, both for sport and by poachers, as well as large-scale conversion of habitat to agricultural land took a heavy toll and rhino populations were decimated. By the early 20th century, only a handful of animals remained, in fragmented pockets of suitable habitat in Assam, Bengal and Nepal. Kaziranga National Park, for instance, at its creation in 1905, had only an estimated 10-20 rhinos.

Through effective protection and strict enforcement, the rhinos recovered spectacularly during the last century in both India and

Nepal. When Kaziranga celebrated its centenary in 2005, the park was home to some 1,700 rhinos and that number has risen further to over 2,250. The total world population estimate is now thought to exceed 3,250.

Today the illegal trade in horns and other body parts that are used in traditional Asian medicine continues and despite the continued high-level protection the threat from poachers remains omnipresent. With rhino horn an extremely expensive commodity (shaved or powdered horn has reached US\$20,000 - US\$30,000 per kilo in certain east Asian markets), poaching methods continue to evolve and become ever more sophisticated.

The recovery of the rhino population in Kaziranga is certainly one of the great success stories in conservation. But elsewhere the recovery has been fitful, and remains tenuous. In

Nepal, numbers increased from 50 in 1950 to 650 in 2000, but more recently there have been significant losses in both Royal Chitwan and especially Royal Bardia National Parks, where in combination perhaps 40% of the countries rhinos (250 animals) have been lost in the last five years. Assam has also suffered problems and setbacks. Significant poaching often related to ethnic conflicts and subsequent deterioration in law-and-order has been an issue in some of the smaller Assamese

reserves. Moreover, concentrating such a high proportion of a species' entire population in a single protected area like Kaziranga exposes the species to increased risk from factors like epidemics, floods, and major co-ordinated poaching efforts.), Conversely in Pabitora, a much smaller reserve downstream of Kaziranga on the banks of the Brahmaputra River, rhinos have now exceeded the reserves carrying capacity and numbers must be reduced to protect the delicate habitat



Above: the great spotted woodpecker spends much of its time clinging to tree trunks, announcing its presence with a loud hammering against the bark. Below: the Northshots group train their lenses

mighty Brahmaputra River and has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since it was inscribed in 1985. The park covers a large area (430 sq.km.) of flood plain and consists of a mosaic of dense elephant grass, shallow swamps (jheels) and stands of evergreen forest.

In addition to rhinos, Kaziranga is an excellent place to see herds of wild elephants, wild buffalo, swamp deer or barasingha, hog deer and wild boar. The grasslands and adjacent marshes are prime spots for birds of prey, like the crested serpent eagle, Pallas's fish eagle, grey-headed fish eagle and occasionally pied harrier, while the more open wetlands support large numbers of waterfowl and other water birds, such as white pelican, open-billed stork and black-necked stork. In more densely wooded areas there are regular sightings of Oriental pied hornbill, great Indian hornbill, red-breasted parakeet, green-billed malkoha, blue-bearded bee-eater and blue whistling thrush.

Keen to see more of the variety and diversity the park had to offer, I visited the western part of the park in the afternoon. In a small open 4x4, accompanied by a ranger, I →



Above: the elusive mountain hare, or Lepus timidus, pauses long enough to photograph. Below: photojournalist Fiona Halliday

explored a number of forest tracks and completed a large circuit that took in areas of grassland, swamps (or jheels) and smaller patches of adjacent forests. Along the way we were able to stop at a strategic watchtower that overlooked one of the larger lakes and swamps.

The view was captivating: one of those scenes that at cursory first glance didn't seem to offer much, but the more you looked, the more you were drawn in and the more you saw. Immediately I could make out a small number of rhinos, either in full view or partially concealed in the long grass, but as my eyes adjusted, many more became apparent and after 15 minutes of concerted effort I'd racked up a count in excess of 30 (more than one per cent of the world's entire population!).

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A small herd of wild elephants also wandered out of adjacent forest, through the tall grass and down to the open water to drink and wallow, while groups of elegant swamp deer picked at the succulent fresh grass around the margins of the lake. Overhead small flocks of noisy red-breasted parakeets passed by in a regular stream and in the distance a huge great Indian hornbill flapped furiously before gliding effortlessly between two patches of forest.

By the time I dragged myself down from the tower, shadows had lengthened significantly and dusk was drawing in fast. The brief transition between day and night is always a time of anticipation and potential excitement: animals normally shrouded in the secrecy of the night, might just make a slightly premature appearance. So flanked either side by elephant grass, we continued along the forest track. We had to be more wary and cautious in case a cantankerous rhino lurked in the shadows, but most are savvy to the sound of an engine and move off the tracks long before you approach. Yet each time we rounded a corner, I strained to look as far down the track **WT**



TRIP ADVISER >>>>>>

COST RATING ★★☆☆☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR: Wildlife Worldwide offer a 14 day package to look for India's 'Big Five' (Asiatic lion, tiger, leopard, elephant and one-horned rhino) that takes in three parks, Sasangir in Gujarat, Kanha in Madhya Pradesh and Kaziranga in Assam. This trip offers three nights at Wild Grass Lodge located near the best areas of Kaziranga and gives ample opportunity to see rhinos, elephants and the other wildlife Kaziranga has to offer.

Prices start from £2,795 including international and domestic flights, land transfers, most meals, eight nights in hotels and three nights in lodge/tented camp, plus guided activities.

GETTING THERE: There are numerous international carriers to either New Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata, with onward domestic connections to Guwahati in Assam. It is also possible to take the train from various stations in Central India to Kolkata and then fly to Guwahati. Kaziranga is a further 5-6 hours by road from Guwahati.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: Visas are required by most foreign nationals. A six-month tourist visa for UK citizens cost £67 and is available by visiting India Visa Fast Track Office, Nagpal House, 1 Gunthorpe Street, London E1 7RG. Postal applications need to be sent to India Visa Head Office, 36 Victoria Avenue, Grays, Essex, RM16 2RP

TIPS & WARNINGS: There is a variety of lodge accommodation within easy reach of the park. This ranges from relatively cheap guest houses, to Assam tourism lodges, to better private lodges like Wild Grass Lodge which is recommended. Elephant rides are available in the morning from the central part of the park and must be booked in advance. They are charged as extras to tours.

WHEN TO GO Kaziranga is best visited from mid November

TOUR OPERATORS:

- **WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE**, Tel: 0845 130 6982; www.wildlifeworldwide.com
- **AUDLEY TRAVEL**, Tel: 01993 838 300; www.audleytravel.com
- **ANNONLINE**, Tel: 088 731 5567; www.annonline.com