

# Floods in Kaziranga

*M. M. Islam IFS*

**A wildlife guard in the Kaziranga National Park, in Assam, describes what happens to the wildlife in the floods that inundate large areas every year, and the need for powered boats for rescue operations.**

Kaziranga National Park, on the south side of the Brahmaputra River in Assam, is recognised as one of the world's finest wildlife sanctuaries. The 1972 census showed thirty tigers here, and besides the one-horned Indian rhino, there are buffaloes, swamp deer, hog deer, barking deer, wild boar, wild elephants, bears, gaur and sambar, and many birds. It covers 425 sq. km. of mainly high dense grassland interspersed with open forest connected by streams and bils (lakes).

Fire and flood are annual features. Every year about half the grasslands are burned; without such fires many areas would have become woodland. The burned areas provide good grazing grounds for the animals. The annual floods, like the fires, are also necessary to maintain the vegetation and habitat for species like rhinos and buffaloes though they are not liked by many ungulates. During the rains, the rivers and streams overflow, and sometimes the entire sanctuary is flooded. Three quarters of the western part of the sanctuary, the Baguri area, is normally flooded. The 1972 census showed that the concentration of wild animals there was much higher than in other blocks, which may be because the silt deposits help the growth of fresh grass.

In August 1950 a severe earthquake in north-eastern India brought huge landslides that blocked many big tributaries of the



HOG DEER carried away



A DROWNED TIGER CUB



FLOOD WATER INVADES THE VISITING CENTRE, August 1973

Brahmaputra. When these dams burst, great floods spread devastation in the plains; silt deposits are still being carried down the Brahmaputra, as a result of which flood damage increases every year, and the sanctuary suffers badly. The flood water clears the introduced water hyacinth *Eichhornia crassipes*, a serious weed that blocks water channels, and also adds fertility to the savanna, but the animals are deprived of food, fodder and shelter during the five to ten days of highest flood. Rhinos and buffaloes are good swimmers and can stand flood water up to four or five feet, but small mammals are badly hit.

In 1973, Kaziranga had two great floods, one from June 17th to 22nd, due to a breached embankment on the eastern side, and one between August 5th and 10th, when the flood level was one and a half feet higher than the maximum ever previously recorded, and inundated almost the entire sanctuary. Elephants, rhinos, buffaloes, sambar, swamp and hog deer sought the higher ground, but many animals were washed away and many smaller ones perished. The guards found herds of deer struggling in the flood water, others being washed away, having given up the struggle. Some they were able to rescue with their small unpowered boats; with engines they could have rescued many more. Rhinos with young were in difficulties, and a few young ones were probably washed away. The number of casualties is not known, but they included one dead tiger cub. Moreover, the sanctuary staff had to patrol day and night to guard the animals that had managed to reach high ground and were easy targets.

The wildlife staff in Kaziranga face great inconvenience through the lack of powered boats. These are needed at all times of year but especially in times of flood to speed up the rescue of drowning animals and to cope with the swift currents of the flood waters. The main roads and paths inside the sanctuary also need to be widened and raised considerably, which would give some higher ground for the animals during flood time.