

The Golden Langur and the Manas Sanctuaries

By Philip Wayre

Although first noted by E. O. Shebbeare in 1907, the golden langur monkey *Presbytis geei* was only named and described after E. P. Gee had found and photographed it in 1953 on the east bank of the Manas River on the Bhutan-Assam border. Both India and Bhutan have declared a Manas sanctuary, one on each bank of the Manas River. The author and his wife, who went to the Bhutan sanctuary to photograph and study this rare langur in the spring of 1967, describe the area as still wonderfully unspoiled, a verdict fully endorsed by the members of the FPS tour to India in February this year who visited both sanctuaries.

THE Manas Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam, covering 105 square miles, lies at the foot of the Himalayas where the River Manas debouches on to the plain. Across the river lie the mountains of Bhutan and the neighbouring Bhutan Manas Sanctuary covering 162 square miles. Perhaps the greatest attraction of this wonderful area is that it is still wild, remote and completely unspoilt; visitors are few and access to the Bhutan Sanctuary is restricted. My wife and I were lucky enough to receive an official invitation to go there to film and study the rare golden langur *Presbytis geei* which is confined to the foothills of the Himalayas along the southern border of Bhutan with neighbouring Assam. This beautiful monkey was named after the well-known naturalist Mr E. P. Gee, who first introduced it to scientists in 1953, and who has done so much to help save India's fast vanishing wildlife.

During our stay from March 25th to April 13th 1967, we spent six days observing a troupe of golden langurs in the forest on the Bhutan side of the river.

The Manas jungle is of the type known as tropical moist deciduous. The trees are high, up to 150 feet, the canopy is almost closed and climbers are numerous. Beneath the trees the shrub layer is dense in patches; elsewhere the forest floor is covered with fallen leaves which at this time of the year are dry and brittle. In this type of forest the trees have a leafless period during the dry season at the end of which new leaves or flowers are produced in a sudden rush. Many trees were in flower during our visit and new leaves were just beginning to appear.

Owing to the thickness of the canopy it was difficult to count the golden langurs in our study area round the Bhutan camp, but we know that there were not fewer than 20 nor more than 35. There appeared to be two main groups of 11 and 7 animals respectively, each consisting of a dominant male, adult females and sub-adults of both sexes. In the larger group there was a second adult male almost as big as the leader and we saw some fighting. Two adult females in the larger group were each carrying a baby estimated to be between three and four months old, while

a female in the smaller group was carrying a much younger baby perhaps between one and two months old, suggesting that the breeding season falls between December and February.

The langurs were busy feeding in the tree tops most of the day, though they always settled in the safety of a tall liana-draped tree for their mid-day siesta, usually one-and-a-half to two hours. Their favourite food at this time of year was the yellow blossom and the cherry-like buds of the balu tree *Dillenia pentagyna*, though they were also seen to eat the buds of both kum *Careya arborea* and simal *Bombax malabaricum* trees and the leaves of at least two species of liana. In agility golden langurs are second only to gibbons and capable of spectacular leaps from tree to tree. Their normal method of progression is to run along near-horizontal boughs on all fours or occasionally in an upright position, grabbing the vegetation on each side in their hands. Members of a social group appeared to have well-known routes through the trees and would queue up to leap across a gap, each animal taking off from virtually the same place. Faced with a big jump the langur appears to select its landing place on the opposite tree, often many feet below, and then, grasping the twigs on each side in its hands, it will rock to and fro, launching itself by pulling forwards with its arms while springing with its hind legs.

Of the other animals we saw in the two sanctuaries, often while riding on elephant back, Asiatic buffalo *Bubalus bubalis* were common, especially lone males; once I counted a herd of 23 from the balcony of the rest house at Motharguri. Sambar *Cervus unicolor* we saw in the surrounding jungle, both adult females and yearlings but no adult stags. The females had prominent 'sore spot' on the ventral surface of the neck indicating that the rut was in progress. This agrees with Schaller's observations (1967) on sambar in the Kaziranga Sanctuary where he noted two stags and a hind all with sore spots on May 3rd. On the other hand in the Kanha Sanctuary in central India between mid-November and early December he found sore spot on every adult and yearling sambar checked. That the rutting season of the sambar varies considerably is borne out by the young animals we saw later in Taiwan which were born in April and early May, an indication that the rut there had been in August and September. Hog deer *Axis porcinus* and barking deer *Muntiacus muntjak* were common as were wild boar *Sus scrofa*. On the Assam side of the river the golden langur is replaced by the capped langur *Presbytis pileatus* which at this time of year is also often seen feeding in the balu trees.

Great Indian Rhino

The population of great Indian rhinoceros *Rhinoceros unicornis* in the Assam Manas has been put at 15 by E. P. Gee (Simon 1966), but the animal is not often seen due to the amount of cover. Odd individuals however occasionally charge the riding elephants, which are not so familiar with them as the Kaziranga elephants. Wild elephants *Elephas maximus* are not uncommon, and three solitary bulls in the Motharguri area became well known to us, especially the gonerish, or single tusker, which had an unfortunate habit of charging Forest Department jeeps! The largest herd of wild elephant numbered 14 animals.

The bird life of the Himalayan foothills is spectacular and few having once seen the evening flight of great pied hornbills *Buceros bicornis homrai* high over the Manas river to roost in the jungle on the hills opposite will ever forget it, while the mewing notes of the great hill barbet *Megalaima virens magnifica* are one of the most evocative of Indian bird noises.

As it is at present the Manas Sanctuary must be one of the most beautiful places in the world, though from a naturalist's point of view one or two more permanent water holes, like the one recently constructed at Uchilla, and some carefully sited observation towers would be a tremendous additional attraction. The area has been little worked and no doubt surprises are still in store for the careful observer. The pygmy hog *Sus salvanius* may yet be discovered in those dense jungles along the Bhutan border, while we twice caught a glimpse of some rather squat apparently tail-less monkeys rushing away on the ground. They may have been stump-tailed macaques *Macaca speciosa*, though this species has so far not been reported in the Manas.

Sound Recordings

During our visit we made sound recordings of the following species:

Capped langur *Presbytis pileatus*, Golden langur *P. geei*, Hoary-bellied Himalayan squirrel *Callosciurus pygerythrus*, Indian elephant *Elephas maximus*, Barking deer *Muntiacus muntjak*.

Red junglefowl *Gallus gallus murghi*, Common peafowl *Pavo cristatus*, Spotted dove *Streptopelia chinensis*, Red-breasted parakeet *Psittacula alexandri fasciata*, Indian plaintive cuckoo *Cacomantis merulinus*, Long-tailed nightjar *Caprimulgus macrurus albonotatus*, Franklin's nightjar *C. affinis monticolus*, Indian pied hornbill *Anthracoceros malabaricus*, Great hill barbet *Megalaima virens magnifica*, Lineated barbet *M. lineata hodgsoni*, Blue-throated barbet *M. asiatica*, Chloropsis *Chloropsis sp.*, Common Iora *Aegithina t. tiphia*, Red whiskered bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*, Shama *Copsychus malabaricus indicus*.

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