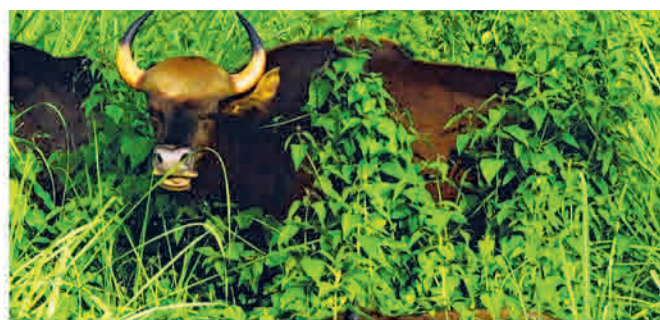


Jaldapara National Park:



By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

Where beasts nest in beauty

Be prepared for anything once you enter Jaldapara National Park of Doars. Anything means any event that can be counted as a sheer delight or a massive disappointment to a wildlife enthusiast. There is a chance that a herd of elephants will cross your path almost from a stone throwing distance or a rhinoceros may walk with you side by side and there is also a chance that after spending 2 hours inside the jungle you may have to be satisfied only by seeing few peacocks and some deer.

That is common in every safari of the world then what makes Jaldapara so distinctive?

The answer lies in its unique set up.

Nature has decorated this misty spectacular forest with everything. The deep and dark wood of shaal and sishu is often contrasted with zones covered with elephant grass. In addition to many water bodies and rivulets, three small rivers viz Malangi, Hollong and Khawa flow inside the park. Now and then behind the shadow of woods, wild creatures - mammals, insects and reptiles pass silently. In the kaleidoscope of light and shadow they are often spotted in their most natural environs. In the middle of the elephant grass, gigantic bison and one-horned rhinoceros keep on grazing while leopards roam in his demarked arena. In a nutshell, Jaldapara is an amazing amphitheatre of wild life that every wanderlust will hate to give a miss.

Jaldapara is one of the national park of Doars of Bengal that dons a distinctive crown on her head. This dense forest announced as a reserve forest in 1941 is now a 216 square km forest that houses some of the most beautiful fauna found in India.

It is bison everywhere in Jaldapara.

Known as Indian gaur this huge creature with its massive horn and mussels often looks directly at visitors eyeballs. In the green Gangetic plain of Doars elephant grass grows in wild and there bison a social animal set up their kingdom. This tallest species among wild cattle is a pure vegetarian by food habit but it is too dangerous if confronted face to face by any chance. The largest bovia native are found here in abundance. The regal looking beast peacefully cohabits in grassland with other giants like elephants and rhinoceros. However you are advised to watch him from a safe distance only.

Jaldapara enjoys an international fame as the 2nd biggest home of world's one of the most amazing animal that is Indian one horned unicorn rhinoceros.

After Kaziranga National Park of Assam which is home of nearly 2300 such animals, Jaldapara is populated by nearly 300 rhinos. The vast green rain forest with abundance of water is an ideal nest for this endangered species. Rhino spotting in Jaldapara is a feast for your eyes. They are found either roaming in grassland or resting in muddy pool or the sand of the river bank. They come close to your safari jeep or safari elephant sometimes too close that it seems you can touch them. However it is better not to dare that. Though a pure vegetarian, an Indian rhino weighs around 2300 kg if it is a full grown male. Once this entire region connected by forest with Nepal, Assam and Bhutan was densely populated

with one horn rhinoceros.

However mindless poaching for its horn and skin has now made their numbers limited in Bengal. Apart from Jaldapara National Park there is just one more national park in Bengal named Gorumara where rhinoceros are still found. Thanks to human brutality, from rest of the places they vanished many years ago.

You have seen nothing in Jaldapara if you have not met the gentle giant of the forest.

It is the sudden and thrilling appearance of elephant that makes this jungle safari an unforgettable experience. The entire green belt of north Bengal is a corridor of elephant movement. Almost every day one or more huge group of elephants sometimes as big as 65 in numbers move from one jungle to another for the search of water and food. Here they come from Assam or sometimes even from Manipur. From here they move to Nepal or nearby Chilapata forest. An encounter with a herd of wild elephant is perhaps the most spine chilling jungle experience for one who understands wild life. When a group moves by smashing grasslands and breaking bushes under their jumbo feet, the soil rocks and the dust flies. It is time one has to obey every single rule demanded inside of a jungle. A casual over enthusiasm can invite unimaginable danger. It is elephant that has priority over everybody else. No risk can be taken in front of *mahakal* a name by which elephants are referred by local.

There are three watch towers inside of this national park. The first one is called Jaldapara watch tower while the 2nd one is called Harindanga. Both the towers overlook a vast green carpet of savannah grass land spread over vast floodplains of Himalayan foothills. From these watch tower chances of spotting wildlife is broad. However the zigzag beaten road on which safari jeep runs is the real theatre of action. With watchful eye and click of luck you can witness lizards, leopards, wild boars, deer and even in a very very rare case a royal Bengal tiger. The first watch tower had a salt pit where salts are kept to attract rhinos and elephants. If luck takes you there on right time trust me you can have the most throbbing feel of your life to see some wild giants from few hands away.

The best watching point of Jaldapara is Hollong watch tower.

Here on the bank of Hollong river tourism department of Bengal Government has built up a tourist guest house with excellent visibility of jungle and its inmates. Your thirst for jungle experience will not find any major reason to complain if you are lucky enough to book Hollong tourist lodge. From the gate of park a jeep needs to run nearly 7 km inside the forest to reach the lodge.

Equipped with all modern facilities it overlooks a rivulets and on the other bank of that from dark and deep vegetation of woods wild life runs like a movie.

At Hollong one does not need to come out to even gar-

den to see a wild rhino or a group of bison standing on the other bank of the river. From bedrooms and balcony of the tourist lodge wildlife of Jaldapara reflects like a documentary.

From Hollong resort forest department organizes elephant safari.

Though the service is limited to few tourists and subject to book in advance it has its own charm. Elephants take riders inside that deep of wood where sunlight hardly touches the soil. It walks over the bush and rivulets giving the maximum chance of hidden rhinos, lizards, deer and leopards. However it covers only 2 km and in set route where as a jeep safari covers more than 25 km in one go.

If you have enough on the ground then now you can chin up to experience another face of this park. Known as the paradise of bird lovers the park is home of several rare birds. Bengal Florican one of the rarest bird can be spotted here. Apart from that almost every branch and log of trees are habited with unknown yet beautiful birds like crested eagle, hornbill, purple sunbird, scarlet minivet, kingfisher and many more. Bird that is most in abundance is peacock. No wonder one of the beaten track of the jungle is named a peacock avenue.

Like every other national park in India Jaldapara is also facing threats of encroachment and poaching. Still this is encouraging enough that the size of the park has increased and there, inside of the deep forest, between light and shadow three giant creatures viz elephants, bison and rhinoceros are still peacefully cohabiting.

Travel Logistics:

Jaldapara National Park is in northern part of Bengal near Madarihat town.

Nearest big station is NJP and nearest airport is Bagdogra.

From station and airport it takes 3 hours plus to reach Madarihat.

Madarihat also has a small station.

West Bengal Tourism has 2 accommodations - One inside the jungle and one at Madarihat town. Both can be booked online.

Useful website - www.jaldapara.in

www.wildbengal.com www.wbtcd.gov.in

Many private hotels are there but Govt accommodation is best as jeep safari and elephant safari booking is done form here only.

Jeep safari takes longer time than elephant - there is no elephant safari in afternoon. Govt tourist lodge organizes a light and show sound in evening on wildlife - a unique concept found nowhere in India except at Jaldapara.



PICS: SOMEN SENGUPTA

