

ABOUT GAUR

By M. Krishnan

GAUR COW SURPRISED WHILE GRAZING

I caught her by surprise. She was grazing slowly towards me, head and neck hidden by the tall grass, and when she was 12 yards away, I whistled sharply to her, with my camera focussed precisely on the place where her head would be when she lifted it. She jerked her head and tail up in surprise, stared at me, and then continued to munch the grass in her mouth while her stare turned placidly inquisitive from alarmed, and then she grazed slowly away from me, quite unconcerned. Which shows that one never can tell with a wild animal!

NOTE ON THE GAUR

The closing decades of the last century, and the early ones of this, were the 'golden age' of Anglo-Indian shikar literature, the period during which millions of 'game animals' were shot down, and many more deprived of their immemorial homes by human usurpation of their territories. These years were also notable for some gruesome misnomers.

'Jungle sheep' for the muntjac, 'elk' for the sambar, 'ibex' for the Nilgiri tahr, and 'kite' for the Lesser White Scavenger vulture, are some of the animal names testifying to the inventiveness of the nimrods of this era, though to be fair to them it must be said that most of them were privates in the army, planters, governmental executives and such like, with no special claim to scholarship or natural history—and we must not forget that it was during this same period of our history that the magnificent and solid work of classifying and describing India's fauna and flora exhaustively and accurately was achieved, almost entirely by British officers, many of them authentic amateurs.

All the same it was during this era that the name 'Indian bison' (or more often just 'bison') was developed, although even during this period the correct name, gaur, borrowed from indigenous languages, was current in English. Now the gaur is no sort of bison, and calling it 'the Indian bison' does not justify or mend things because the bison is a different kind of wild ox altogether, and both the American and the European bisons are authentic bisons. Why we should continue to miscall the gaur 'bison' under the mistaken impression that it is sporting to do so, and pedantic to use the correct, long-established name 'gaur', is something that defies explanation, but it is comforting to think that the Americans, not to be outdone by us, call their bison 'buffalo', though it is totally unrelated to the buffalo!

In Malaya they call the gaur 'seladang'. The gaur has been semi-domesticated in the Assam hills, where it is called 'mithun', and the animals crossbred with domestic cattle, 'gayal', but the gaur is not supposed to have contributed to the evolution of Indian humped cattle. Incidentally, the great dorsal ridge of gaur consists of muscle and gristle, and is not a hump, as the fatty hump of our domestic cattle is.

Gaur are the tallest and handsomest of the world's wild oxen. The Indian wild buffalo* is actually some 200 pounds heavier than the gaur, taking the biggest bulls of both animals for comparison, though almost a foot shorter, and easily the most aggressive and fearsome of all wild cattle.

A big Gaur bull stands over six feet high to the top of its dorsal ridge, and weighs a ton. An old cow is often nearly as big, but normally cows are noticeably smaller and

* The Indian wild buffalo is peculiarly Indian, though it was domesticated here thousands of years ago, and the domestic strain spread to China long ago—as it did to Ceylon, Australia and South America. The "wild" buffalos of Ceylon are feral, i.e. domesticated animals allowed to run wild, and not truly wild.

browner ; the adult bull is very dark, almost or quite black. Newborn calves are beige, or more often a shimmering golden-fawn, they are able to accompany their mother within hours of birth, and at birth the 'horn-buds' are visible, though not prominent.

Gaur are notable for the compact bulk of their build (in spite of their superb size, they are very squarely built), the shortness of their tails, their comparatively small and neat hooves, and the great-muscled agility they are capable of. Even young calves display the white 'stockings' on all four feet, up to the joint above the pattern (up to the hock in the hind legs). Cows and young bulls are brown, the brown varying from raw umber to the deepest vandyke brown. It is said that in the Pulneys there is a strain of wheat-coloured gaur. Gaur and elephants both like the same kind of country, hill-jungles with an assured supply of water, and are very tolerant of each other.

Gaur are highly gregarious. They go about in herds, varying from half-a-dozen to about twenty. Larger herds, up to 60 or 70 animals together, consist of herds grazing in company or trekking in company for the time being—they are composite herds, and are marked by the presence of two or more mature herd-bulls, whereas in a single herd there is usually only one herd-bull. Lone bulls live by themselves, and these consist of young mature bulls which have not yet been able to acquire a harem for themselves, or of old bulls that have left the herds for ever. As Dunbar Brander points out, herd-bulls turn lone bulls long before they show any marked sign of decline.

Gaur are essentially peaceful and bucolic animals, and unlike the Indian wild buffalo, are not aggressive. Provoked and cornered, they will defend themselves, but then so will rats.