

# Kaziranga National Park

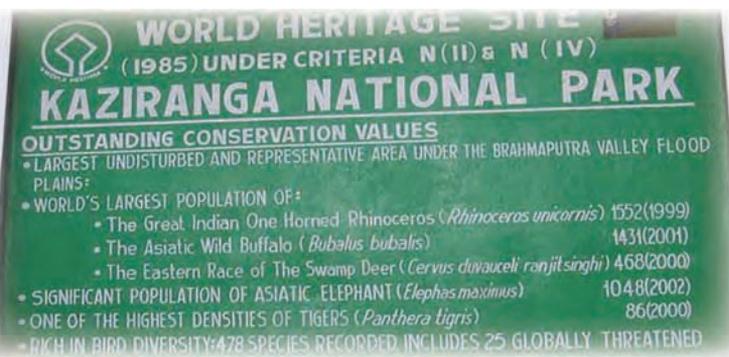
**RENOWNED** as one of the finest and most picturesque wildlife refuges in southern Asia, the Kaziranga National Park in Assam protects the world's largest Indian rhinoceros population, as well as many other species of tigers, elephants, panthers and birds. The park is located in Golaghat and Nagaon

districts of Assam. One of the largest protected tracts south of the Himalayas, this biodiversity hotspot hosts about fifteen threatened species (as per the IUCN listing).

Nestled in the flood plains to the south of the River Brahmaputra, the flora consists of tall, dense grasslands interspersed with open forests, punctuated with streams and lakes

("bheels"). Three-quarters or more of the area is submerged annually by the flood waters of the Brahmaputra. Soils are alluvial deposits of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Park vegetation comprises of alluvial inundated grasslands, alluvial savanna woodlands, tropical moist mixed deciduous forests, and tropical semi-evergreen forests.

In the early nineteenth century,



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*Kaziranga is considered an Important Bird Area by Birdlife International.*

the area around what is now Kaziranga National Park was notorious for wild animals, malaria and frequent floods. With the development of the tea industry, forests were cleared for settlements and tea plantations. At this time, the wife of the Viceroy of India Baroness Mary Victoria Leiter Curzon visited the area in 1904, and failed to spot the rhinoceros that Kaziranga was renowned for. The Assamese animal tracker, Balaram Hazarika, who was conducting the tour of Kaziranga for

Baroness Curzon impinged on the need for wildlife conservation. Baroness Curzon conveyed this to her husband, and Lord Curzon proposed the creation of a reserve in Kaziranga on 4 November 1904.

Kaziranga was originally designated a reserve forest in 1908 with the primary objective of preserving the rhinoceros and other large mammals, since when hunting and shooting have been prohibited. It received the status of a game sanctuary in 1916 and finally became a wildlife sanctuary in 1950. It was designated as a World Heritage site in December 1985.

Apart from the threatened Indian rhinoceros, Kaziranga also boasts of tigers that are natural enemies of rhinos. Other attractions of this national park include the wild buffalo, magnificent swamp deer, hog deer, sloth bear, Indian muntjac, wild boar, Hoolock gibbon, capped langur and ratel (badger). A wide variety of snakes including the rock python and the monitor lizards are also found here.

Kaziranga is designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by Birdlife International. Amongst the birds, the crested serpent eagle is common while palla's fishing eagle and grey-headed fishing eagle are frequently seen. Others include the Bengal florican, bar-headed goose, whistling teal, swamp partridge, grey peacock-pheasant, great pied hornbill, green imperial pigeon, silver-breasted broadbill and pelican.

However, it is the Greater Indian rhinoceros, one of the largest rhinoceroses, that Kaziranga is really famous for. Unlike the other rhinoceroses, the Indian rhinoceros has only one horn. It has a heavily armored appearance with a skin that has many folds. Despite its bulky body, the Indian rhinoceros is an excellent swimmer. It can also run up to 35 miles per hour for a short time.

Rhinoceroses have excellent hearing and smell but poor eyesight. They spend a lot of time wallowing in water and mud to protect their skin. The harmless rhinoceroses are herbivorous; they browse, graze, and eat fruits and seeds.

Today most of the wild population is found in two protected areas. One area is in Nepal and the other is the Kaziranga National Park. At one time, the Indian rhinoceros ranged throughout much of Southeast Asia. But today, due to indiscriminate poaching the numbers have come down drastically.

It is the horn of the rhino that has made it the target of poachers. Asian rhino horn can be sold for more than twice its weight in gold. After processing, it has been known to reach \$30,000 per kg. The horn is used to make medicines that are thought to relieve pain and fever and also as an aphrodisiac. But there is no scientific confirmation for such beliefs. In addition to the horn, rhino hide, blood, urine, and dung also fetch money.