

Rasiabdh Swamp Deer Conservation Reserve in Jilmil Tal Area, District Hardwar, Uttaranchal

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Currently, grassland exists only in a few places in the entire terai. Grasslands have declined primarily due to factors such as extensive pressure of grazing and expansion of crop fields and settlements. In future, remaining grasslands also may cease to exist, and with it the wild animals which depend upon grasslands habitat. Most grasslands have been encroached by woody species due to past silviculture and the accompanying practice of monoculture. In the past, grassland was considered waste land which was neglected and used for commercial purpose by growing species like teak, Eucalyptus and, more recently, Ailanthus and Poplar. As a result many large mammals lost their habitat, such as Swamp deer or Barasingha (*Cervus duvauceli duvauceli*) and even Indian One horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). Rhino used to be widely distributed all along the flood plains of Rivers Ganga and Yamuna. Today both barasingha and rhino are found only in restricted localities of protected areas.

Dudhwa National Park was thought to be the only locality of the Swamp deer (*Cervus duvauceli duvauceli*). In 1995 its estimated population was 850 individuals with another population in Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary, a satellite of Dudhwa National Park with 400 individuals. A few other populations had been reported such as Katerniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary (50), Pilibhit- (200) and in Hastinapur (25). Today, in Dudhwa National Park, the Swamp deer population has reduced drastically due to habitat loss in Sathiana, which was once the prime area for Swamp deer. The primary cause of decline is heavy siltation in Suheli River and the monsoon over-flooding caused by construction of Suheli Barrage. This over-flooding has also led to replacement of desirable grasses with unpalatable varieties, thus rendering the habitat unsuitable. Most fawning sites also have been affected due to over flooding and encroachment by local villagers. Poaching is also a major factor. The Hastinapur population may become lost due to poaching in future.

After the formation of Uttaranchal State in 1999, Hon. Forest Minister of Uttarnachal State, Shri Nav Prabhat and present Chief Wildlife Warden, Shri Srikant Chandola took initiative to reintroduce rhino from areas in India where rhinos are over populated in India and Nepal into some suitable area along the flood plains in Uttaranchal. Currently a few such areas are available but adequate space and anthropogenic pressure around in such places is a limiting factor. In Rasiabdh area Jilmil Tal is one of the areas which falls in the flood plains of River Ganges in Hardwar District in Uttaranchal.

Jilmil Tal is a saucer-shaped marshy area surrounded by grasslands and woodlands which are ideal for Swamp deer and Rhinos. Due to the presence of Gujjar huts (around 9) with a large number of buffalo and cows around Jilmil Tal, organic effluent goes directly to the Jilmil Tal and supports thick vegetation cover. Prime area is covered by Typha, although Phragmites karka also present in the half

of the Tal area. Another factor is the use of fertilizers and insecticides by cultivators. It has been proposed to analyze the water samples in and around the Jilmil Tal to know the present status of water quality. In this area five species of deer are found despite of human pressure, which is remarkable. Now, another Swamp deer population has been sighted near Laksar.

Jilmil Tal area also has a wild elephant population which raids the sugar cane fields every evening. Perhaps as a result of farmers trying to protect their crops, there have been a number of cases of human mortality by wild elephants. In this area cultivators are from Garhwal, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh having migrated from their respective places 50 years ago. Fortunately, these cultivators are sanatanny dharmas which requires them to abstain from non-vegetarian food and alcohol, so there is no poaching of Swamp deer. In the past Swamp deer was reported from this locality on the basis of the secondary information gathered from local cultivators and Gujjars living around the Jilmil Tal. Usually they do not disclose the animals' presence because of the fear that once the animal is sighted then they may have shift from that locality.

Due to a number of reasons, including heavy rains, we could not make a visit to this area since September, 2004. On 1 February, 2005, Chief Wildlife Warden of Uttaranchal State and the writer decided to visit this area. We sighted 34 Swamp deer in the grassland of Jilmil Tal. Again on 3 February, we visited the same area and saw 30 Swamp deer. During this Mr. Vinod Rishi, Director of Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy, (IGNFA), Dehra Dun also saw the Swamp deer. Finally on 6th February, 2005, Hon Minister of Forest of Uttaranchal, Shri Nav Prabhat visited the area, observed 18 Swamp deer and decided to consider this area as Rasiabdh Swamp deer Conservation Reserve in Jilmil Tal. There is a possibility of more than 70 Swamp deer in this area. It is also fortunate that the people living around Swamp deer area are willing to shift from this area into suitable areas selected by themselves. A meeting was called and most of the local villagers and head of the village took part. One old cultivator of the area residing here for the last 50 years reported that some poachers from the Muslim community also visit the area from another side of the Ganges, and kills the deer. They also threaten the cultivators to prevent them from informing the forest department.

The area proposed by the villagers was also visited and considered. Similarly Gujjars Deera will be shifted into the Gujjar rehabilitation area where land is already allotted. If the local cultivators willingly shift from this area then more than 50 sq km area will become available for Swamp Deer Conservation Reserve, and in the coming years, perhaps rhino could be reintroduced with proper planning.

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