

Kaziranga National Park — Plenty of Sloth Bears, but are there Other Bear Species?

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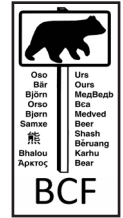
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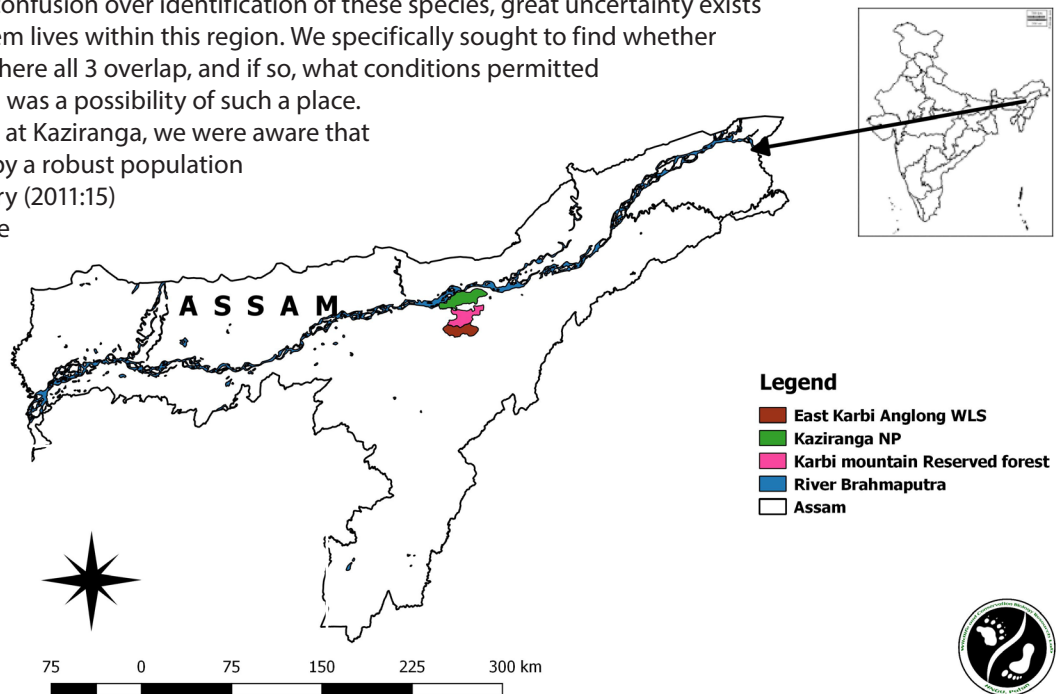
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India's Kaziranga National Park, located in the state of Assam in northeastern (NE) India is most known for its one-horned inhabitant, the Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). But it contains a host of other fascinating wildlife as well, including tigers, leopards, elephants, water buffalo, gaur, sambar, and swamp deer. Kaziranga comprises a lush mixture of grasslands, marshlands, riverine forests, and mixed-deciduous and semi-evergreen tropical forests, crosscut by 4 rivers and interspersed with lakes. During the peak of the monsoon in July – August, much of the park is flooded. We were interested in what bear species occupy this park and surrounding areas.

Three bear species occupy NE India (Asiatic black, *Ursus thibetanus*, sloth, *Melursus ursinus*, and sun, *Helarctos malayanus*), but due to confusion over identification of these species, great uncertainty exists about where each of them lives within this region. We specifically sought to find whether there might be places where all 3 overlap, and if so, what conditions permitted this sympatry. Kaziranga was a possibility of such a place.

Before spending time at Kaziranga, we were aware that the park was inhabited by a robust population of sloth bears: Choudhury (2011:15) described the park as the "the most important site for the species in NE India." We were aware of no evidence for the presence of Asiatic black bears or sun bears within or adjacent to the park. However, there are old records of sun bear cubs formerly being found in tea farms bordering the park's grassland and Karbi Mountains areas (Choudhury 2011).



Kaziranga National Park, bordered by the Brahmaputra River to the north and Karbi Mountain range to the south, offers a possible intersection of habitats favorable to 3 bear species.

Conservation

Thomas Sharp



Diggings for termites, claw marks and half-eaten honeycomb indicated that a sloth bear feasted at this site within a patch of riverine forest.

Thomas Sharp



Sloth bear scat was found on the second floor of this watchtower overlooking the Kaziranga grasslands.

Literature Cited

Choudhury, A.U. 2011. Records of Sloth Bear and Malayan Sun Bear in North East India. Final report to International Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA). The Rhino Foundation for nature in NE India, Guwahati, Assam, India.



Thomas Sharp

The grasslands of Kaziranga National Park, Assam, India, harbor most of the world's Indian rhinoceroses, and apparently a sizeable population of sloth bears. The Karbi Mountains, possibly inhabited by Asiatic black bears and/or sun bears are in the background.

With the help of a research and conservation grant from the IBA we were able to visit 4 sites in NE India, intending to lay the groundwork for future studies of the overlap of these 3 bear species in NE India. The field visit to Kaziranga involved taking jeeps along safari roads through the park's grasslands for 8 – 10 km. With forest officers and staff, whom we had just trained about identification of bear sign, we searched mainly for bear diggings into termite mounds — a definitive sign of sloth bears. We found that many mounds had at some time been broken into. We also found 3 different sloth bear signs at a single site: diggings into a termite mound that surrounded a tree; sloth bear claw marks on the tree; and the remains of honeycomb at the base, which explains the bear's motivation for climbing it. We also found sloth bear scat (recognizable by the termite remains) on a footbridge over the Difolu River, and at a watchtower that we checked based on information from a local mahout (elephant caretaker), who had seen a sloth bear climbing down one morning. The large amount of sign that we observed in such a short time and small area, and along well-travelled safari routes, suggests that sloth bears are indeed very common in the park.

Sloth bears are known to relish grasslands with abundant termite mounds, which are a hallmark of this park. Asiatic black bears and sun bears, are forest-dependent species. Although the grasslands contain patches of alluvial woodlands, these are too small to support a forest-dependent bear species. However, the Karbi Mountains (not part of the national park but protected as reserved forest), south of grasslands, are well forested and contain potential habitat for all 3 bear species. The grasslands and mountain areas are only separated by a single-lane highway and, in certain places, tea farms or other small developments. We were not able to conduct any sign surveys in the Karbi Mountains on this trip. Additionally, whereas by-catch of camera-trapping for tigers has provided many photos of bears, we were informed that no camera traps have been set in the reserved forest of the Karbi Mountains. Therefore, the species of bears in this area remains unknown. Thus, this area will be a prime target for our search for that rare remnant patch of habitat possibly shared by 3 species of bears.

