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# Wildlife and Fauna of Cambodia

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## Introduction

Cambodia, nestled in the heart of Southeast Asia, is a land brimming with natural wonders and ecological richness. Its landscapes are a vivid tapestry woven from dense forests, wetlands, sprawling grasslands, and rugged mountains—each supporting an astonishing array of wildlife. This remarkable biodiversity makes Cambodia an essential stronghold not only for regional, but also for global conservation efforts. The vital role these ecosystems play is magnified by Cambodia's place at the crossroads of three biogeographic regions: Indochina, coastal Indochina, and the Annamese Mountains. These regions grant the country its signature abundance of habitats and species.

Over the past few decades, scientific research and dedicated exploration have uncovered an even greater wealth of fauna than previously imagined. Mammal, bird, reptile, amphibian, and fish species counts continue to rise as new discoveries are made. Iconic and elusive animals, from the Asian elephant and clouded leopard to the critically endangered Siamese crocodile and Giant Ibis, call Cambodia home. Yet, for every discovery, there are stark reminders of fragility: many of these species face grave threats that imperil their future survival.

The sheer diversity found in Cambodia's forests, wetlands, mountains, and rivers sustains not only wildlife but also the livelihoods of local communities. The interdependence between people and nature is complex, shaped by centuries of tradition, economic necessity, and cultural heritage. At the same time, pressures from rapid development, deforestation, illegal wildlife trade, and climate change threaten to unravel this intricate balance. Species unique to this region—some of which may still be awaiting scientific description—are at risk of disappearing before their secrets can be fully understood.

In recent years, concerted conservation efforts have taken root, spearheaded by government agencies, international organizations, and local communities working in partnership. Protected areas now span a significant portion of the country, providing refuges for endangered species and preserving vital habitats. From community-based conservation projects and anti-poaching patrols to captive breeding and reintroduction initiatives, Cambodia has become a testing ground for innovative wildlife protection strategies.

This book, "Wildlife and Fauna of Cambodia: A Guide to the Wildlife and Fauna of Cambodia," is intended as a comprehensive introduction for readers interested in understanding, appreciating, and helping to preserve this unique natural heritage. It explores the diversity of Cambodia's habitats and fauna, the immense challenges

facing conservationists, and the remarkable achievements and ongoing struggles to safeguard the country's biodiversity.

By delving into the stories of Cambodia's wild inhabitants—both celebrated and obscure—this guide aims to foster a deeper appreciation for the nation's ecological riches and encourage collective action for their protection. As Cambodia stands at a crossroads for its environment, a greater awareness and understanding of its wildlife are more crucial than ever for ensuring that the wonders of its natural world endure for generations to come.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Geography and Natural Landscapes of Cambodia**

Cambodia, a nation that occupies a significant portion of the Indochinese Peninsula in Southeast Asia, is a country shaped by its distinct geographical features. Bordered by Thailand to the west and northwest, Laos to the northeast, Vietnam to the east and southeast, and the Gulf of Thailand to the southwest, its location has historically placed it at a crossroads of cultural and ecological exchange. Covering an area of approximately 181,035 square kilometers, Cambodia's landscape is predominantly defined by a low-lying central plain that cradles the vast Tonle Sap Lake and the fertile floodplains of the lower Mekong River. This central bowl, if you will, is then ringed by uplands and low mountain ranges that form natural boundaries and contribute to the country's varied ecosystems.

The heart of Cambodia is undoubtedly its expansive central plain. This region, covering about 75 percent of the country's landmass, is a vast alluvial and lacustrine plain, meaning it's been shaped over eons by the deposition of sediments from rivers and lakes. The Tonle Sap Basin and the Mekong River lowlands together form this fertile core, a critical area for agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, and home to the majority of the Cambodian population. Unlike some countries with dramatically varied elevations packed into small areas, much of this central plain sits at less than 100 meters above sea level, giving it a generally flat, almost seamless character that transitions into slightly more rolling terrain as it approaches the surrounding highlands.

Cutting through the eastern part of the country and dominating the central plain is the mighty Mekong River. This colossal waterway, one of the longest in Asia, flows southwards into Cambodia from Laos, carving a path for approximately 500 kilometers before eventually fanning out into a delta as it enters Vietnam on its journey to the South China Sea. The Mekong is far more than just a river here; it's the lifeblood of the nation, influencing everything from agriculture through its annual deposition of nutrient-rich sediment to transportation and, of course, providing a critical habitat for a staggering array of aquatic life. Its presence defines the hydrology of the entire central region, especially in its unique relationship with the Tonle Sap Lake.

Connected to the Mekong River near Phnom Penh by a channel known as the Tonle Sap River, the Tonle Sap Lake is a geographical marvel and arguably the most significant freshwater feature in Southeast Asia. Its most extraordinary characteristic is its dramatic seasonal fluctuation in size and depth, a phenomenon driven by the Mekong's annual flood pulse. During the dry season, typically from November to May,

the lake is relatively small and shallow. However, with the onset of the monsoon rains and the subsequent swelling of the Mekong around June, the flow of the Tonle Sap River actually reverses, pushing water back into the lake. This causes the lake to expand dramatically, inundating vast areas of surrounding forest and agricultural land.

The Tonle Sap Lake can grow from a dry season area of roughly 2,500 to 3,000 square kilometers to an astonishing 10,000 to 16,000 square kilometers during the peak of the wet season. This incredible expansion also sees its depth increase significantly, from perhaps only a meter or so in the dry months to nine or even fourteen meters when fully engorged. This dynamic hydrological system, while presenting challenges for human settlements, creates an exceptionally productive ecosystem, supporting immense fish populations and providing vital wetlands for numerous bird species. It's a natural flood regulator for the lower Mekong basin and a cornerstone of Cambodia's ecological health and food security.

Ring-fencing the central plains are several prominent mountain ranges. To the southwest lie the Cardamom Mountains (Krâvanh Mountains) and their southeastern extension, the Elephant Mountains (Dâmrei Mountains). These ranges form a significant highland region situated between the Tonle Sap and the Gulf of Thailand. The Cardamom Mountains, running in a northwest-southeast direction, boast Cambodia's highest peak, Phnom Aural, which reaches an elevation of 1,813 meters. The Elephant Mountains, while generally lower, still reach considerable heights, typically between 500 and 1,000 meters. These mountains are characterized by steep slopes and dense forests, particularly on their western flanks, which receive substantial rainfall from the southwest monsoon.

Along the northern border with Thailand stretches the Dangrek Mountains (Dângrêk Mountains). This range forms a distinct sandstone escarpment that rises abruptly from the northern edge of the Cambodian plain. While their average elevation is around 500 meters, the escarpment itself can reach heights of 180 to 550 meters above the plain. The southern face of the Dangrek Mountains is notably steeper than the northern slopes, presenting a more dramatic transition from the lowlands. This range acts as a natural boundary and its forested slopes contribute another important habitat type to Cambodia's varied geography.

To the east of the Mekong River, the transitional plains gradually give way to the Eastern Highlands. This region of forested mountains and high plateaus merges with the Annamite Range that extends into neighboring Laos and Vietnam. While perhaps less dramatically defined than the Cardamom or Dangrek ranges, these eastern highlands are rugged and support dense forests, contributing to the overall biodiversity of the country. Together, these mountain systems form the elevated edges of the Cambodian "bowl," influencing rainfall patterns and creating diverse microclimates and ecological niches.

Cambodia also possesses a coastline along the Gulf of Thailand in the southwest. This coastal region, stretching for approximately 443 kilometers, is a mix of features including mangrove marshes, peninsulas, sandy beaches, headlands, and bays. The narrow coastal plain is backed by the southwestern mountains, which isolate it somewhat from the central lowlands. This area also includes numerous offshore islands, adding another dimension to Cambodia's geographical diversity and providing unique marine and coastal habitats.

The topography of Cambodia plays a crucial role in shaping its climate, which is dominated by a tropical monsoon system. This system brings about two distinct seasons of roughly equal length: the dry season and the rainy season. The southwest monsoon, drawing moisture-laden air from the Indian Ocean, arrives around mid-May and brings the rainy season, which typically lasts until September or early October. Conversely, the northeast monsoon, bringing drier and cooler air, dominates from early November to March, marking the dry season.

While temperatures are generally high and relatively consistent throughout the year, averaging around 25°C in the central lowlands, the geographical variations do influence local climate. Maximum temperatures can exceed 32°C and sometimes climb above 38°C just before the onset of the rainy season. Rainfall varies significantly across the country, influenced by elevation and exposure to the monsoons. The western slopes of the southwestern mountains receive the heaviest rainfall, often exceeding 2,500 mm annually, sometimes even surpassing 5,000 mm due to the direct impact of the southwest monsoon. In contrast, areas in the rain shadow of these mountains receive considerably less precipitation. The central plains generally receive between 1,000 and 1,500 mm of rainfall per year. This interplay of mountains, plains, rivers, and coast, all under the influence of the tropical monsoon, creates the varied landscapes that support Cambodia's rich and diverse wildlife.

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