



Photography ALAMY

Wild Things

Our jungles teem with wildlife but being obsessively focussed on sighting a tiger can make us blind to this facet. And so it is that tigers are elusive for a reason. While the big cat does lurk in the jungles of Nagarhole National Park, there is a wealth of fauna in those deep, dark woods.

Words NEHARIKA GUPTA



Leopards are among the big cats—apart from tigers and panthers—that are found in the Nagarhole National Park

The watering holes in the national park are great spots for beautiful sightings such as this one



ALAMY



I am steeped in the *jungli*-ness of Kabini River Lodge. Resident fruit bats swoosh up and down around me, like squirrels with large wings. Surrounding me are wildlife addicts—people who live for sightings of the jungle cats. Masala peanuts and masala *papad* are loaded on the tables before us. It is late evening and the monkeys who were stealing bananas have climbed atop trees and swung away for the night. Bedtime.

But, at the tables, groups of people buzz with anticipation. No signs of going to bed. Talk abounds of the tiger and leopard sightings of the day. One lucky jeepful had a sighting of the elusive black panther. Safari-goers and naturalists mingle. For many photographers, coming face-to-face with one of the big cats is the pot of gold of their pilgrimage, and they rely on the instincts of the naturalists who accompany them on every safari.

Let alone leopards and panthers, I have yet to see a tiger in the wild. All my childhood *jungli* memories are of safaris in Corbett and Sariska where all I would see were peacocks, deer and an odd rhino.

So when I got the chance to accompany wildlife enthusiast Nanda Kumar on a tiger-sighting and photography trip, I jumped at it. And here I am, in search of the elusive tiger, spending dawn and dusk in the jungle for a glimpse of him.

The forest within the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve seems to be working to provide the jungle felines much camouflage. Many of the trees are naked and much of the ground is burnt due to controlled fires. Where there is grass, it is the colour of the sun. Within this burnt sienna-toned panorama, spotting a tiger will not be easy. Spotting deer from a moving vehicle is challenging enough.

As our 4x4 negotiates the terrain, our naturalist, Shiva, explains why we stop at every crossing and how he tracks a tiger through the forest. We wait to hear the warning calls of the *langur* and deer, and on hearing them, move in their direction. With more than 70 tigers in the reserve, deer and monkeys will almost always be in the territory of some of the big cats.

Our driver, Anil, also a naturalist, does his best to take us from one deer's warning call to the next. But these sprightly antlered beings have a skittish temperament. Every time they get a whiff of a tiger's scent, they freak out and alert the entire herd. All we end up seeing are herds and herds of spotted deer. Ultimately, we decide to visit 'Tiger Tank,' a watering hole.

It is a veritable social networking hub. An Asiatic elephant minds her baby, jackals stop by, wild pigs eat roots around the road and *gaur* graze by the river. *Langurs* sit amicably beside



Nagarhole National Park is rich in wildlife and even as you keep an eye out for the tiger, you'll spot monkeys, wild dogs and crocodiles

The birds are hunting, poised on a perch or in spectacular flight, but the showstopper

the *chital*, while winged visitors perch above their heads. The birds come from the mini-archipelago within the Kabini backwaters. Wings of turquoise flash, along with specks of black and white—the Indian roller and magpie robin have made their presence known. From pied kingfishers, painted storks and darters to serpent hawks, osprey and grey herons, there unfolds a bustling ecosystem before us.

The birds are hunting, poised on a perch or in spectacular flight, but the showstopper is the crocodile. Lying immobile at a cleaning station, it has to be pointed out to us. Through binoculars, we can see little egrets doing a dentist's job on it. Then a safari boat gets too close and suddenly the log of wood slinks into the water to become motionless again, only the eyes visible on the surface.

Sunset and dusk follow, and I realise the day has ended without a tiger sighting. But Shiva is confident that I will see one soon.

Being in a forest for three hours is a marvelous experience but I was so enthralled by the watering hole that I decide to go back there on a morning boat safari. With some luck, I might see a tiger getting his first drink.

A white haze hangs above the banks of the river when I arrive. Despite my warm jacket, I am chilled to the bone. Giant cormorants eye us from atop their dead tree, creepier than ravens. A perfect setting for an Edgar Allan Poe story, but I push the thought away.

I am here to see tigers, not be haunted by ominous avian omens. Movement in the water around the boat does not help. Crocodiles? I remind myself that the crocs are as scared of us, as we are of them.

The boatman starts moving the boat slowly through the fog. In a matter of minutes, we are completely lost. We cannot see the lodge, the cormorants or even the ripples our boat is making on the water. Moving slowly, as if on a sheet of glass, we come across two fishermen who show us the way. We keep moving for half an hour, and then come upon the same fishing coracle. We have been going around in circles! The fishermen laugh at us, and provide directions all over again.

But I fish out my iPhone and, thanks to Google Maps, a map of the Kabini appears. We follow it. All of a sudden, we strike land in shallow water. The boatman gets out,

is the crocodile. Lying immobile at a cleaning station, it has to be pointed out to us

into ankle-deep water, and pushes the boat away. Well, at least there are no crocodiles. That is the adventure of the day, and then evening arrives. Still no tiger. The camera around my neck is beginning to feel like an albatross. At the lodge, over masala *papad*, we hear the tiger tales of wildlife photographer Mohan Thomas. He saw BP—the elusive black panther, a couple of days ago. Tiger photographs by Thomas hang around the lodge.

Patience, he says, is the key to seeing wildlife and photographing it. He waited 12 years before he saw his first tiger in the wild, and when he did, it was first with his eyes and not the camera viewfinder.

His words make me feel worse. I do not want to wait 12 years to see a tiger. But I will be patient. It is all I can do.

We are by a small waterbody in the jungle, waiting to hear a warning call. At these moments, everybody in the jeep is still. Not a muscle twitches. All eyes are on the naturalist and all ears are tuned to the forest.

We see two wild dog pups near the water. They scamper around and play. The mother is close by. She approaches the water with two more adults. They are joined by four

more and the entire pack runs across the road. They are planning a hunt.

This is the cruellest creature in the jungle. Wild dogs hunt in packs and are a danger even to the mighty tiger.

While we contemplate life's ways, we receive a phone call about a tiger's whereabouts.

I am in the last seat of the jeep, and told to hold on while Anil speeds on maddeningly. I hang on with one hand, holding my camera in the other.

Ten tense minutes later, we arrive and nobody needs to point anything out to me. I see two white spots on two black ears atop an enormous striped body. In a few seconds, the tigress turns to look at us. All the cameras whir.

We go closer. We can see the face. The magnetism is overpowering. For a quarter of an hour, we take photographs. Then she disappears into the bushes.

I return with a valuable realisation. In three days, I have slowly sighted the entire forest—not just the one animal I had sought. Had I spotted a tiger on the first safari, I would probably have never paid such close attention to the rest of the jungle population. ♦

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WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY TIPS

- **Get a good grip on your camera**

Make sure you know your machine, your lens and how to play with the holy trinity—F-stop, shutter speed and ISO.

- **Change your settings often**

Make sure to adjust your settings when the light changes and take a few test shots. Around dawn and dusk, look out for the golden glow to capture.

- **Have the correct lens**

About 200mm would work fine if you're trying to capture birds but with bears and other animals you are not likely to get close to, you would

need a lens with the focal length starting from 300mm or more.

- **Wait for action**

Eventually, your animal or bird is going to move some body part, or interact with another creature. Being ready for these opportune moments—whether it takes 10 seconds, 10 minutes or more—is worth it.

- **Read up**

Will the tiger turn its head? How long will the peacock dance for? Will the egret go inside the crocodile's mouth? Knowing how your subject behaves can help you plan the exact moment to capture.

- **Be nimble, be quick**

The jungles can be unpredictable; when it comes to wildlife, anything can happen at any time. Stay alert and keep your camera close.

- **Use a sandbag**

Sandbags are an immense help in stabilising your camera focus and saving energy. We all know how heavy the lenses can be!

- **Make sure your guide knows your chosen subject**

Whether it's birds, elephants, tigers or all three, make sure your naturalist knows what you want to see, so he can spot them for you.

NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

Air The nearest airport is at Bengaluru, 220 km away.

Rail Take a train from Bengaluru to Mysore; that takes about two-and-a-half hours and then opt for a car or a bus to Nagarhole National Park.

Road Drive down from Bengaluru to Mysore. Nagarhole National Park is two-and-a-half hours from Mysore.

STAY

Stay at the Kabini River Lodge as all safaris inside the Nagarhole National Park are conducted by the River Lodge and start from here, no matter

where you stay. Other stay options in the vicinity include Kings Sanctuary Resort, Orange County, Red Earth and Jungle Inn, to name a few.

DO

- In addition to jungle safaris, as the lodge is on the banks of the Kabini river, boat safaris, pleasure boat rides and coracle rides are available.

- The lodge premises are rich in flora and fauna. Campus trails can be followed while looking for insects or certain birds.

- An Ayurvedic massage centre located within the lodge area is

the perfect way to refresh oneself between safaris.

- Catch a wildlife film at the Kabini River Lodge.

- Take long walks, lounge with a book or some music, and take in the sights of the forests.

EAT

There aren't any stand-alone restaurants in Nagarhole National Park, but you can enjoy all three meals of the day at your lodge or resort. The meals are usually served as part of a buffet with ample vegetarian and non-vegetarian options.