

Day 36 - 10th Dec. 2009 - Safaris in Kanha National Park

Tiger hunting is not very scientific. It's a bit hit and miss really. There's a lot of driving along rough park tracks following leads from rangers; there's a lot of sitting still for many minutes - as still and quiet as a church mouse listening intently to the sounds of the jungle; there's a lot of adrenalin rush as alarm calls are heard from monkeys, deer, sambas and peacocks; then there's a mad dash, very fast, bouncing all over the place to find the spot where the calls have come from; and then more sitting still, listening, waiting.

What was that? A greater adrenalin rush when the tiger you just know has to be somewhere 'in there' emits a low growl. More sitting still and waiting and listening; more barks and calls of alarm from further away; more mad driving over bumps and humps that put the best of backs to the test. Then suddenly a fast and very hard breaking. I almost land in the front seat - no seat belts here. Goodness, we almost ran over a snake! The snake lived. My knee was not so lucky but I'll live too. We move on - a little more carefully now.

Slowdown; check the sand by the track; yes - there, see, fresh tiger tracks! It's a female. Where is she now? She's in there somewhere! But where?



And we still don't know. But we'll try again tomorrow. Maybe we'll be lucky then for luck is the main factor in tiger sighting. In Africa you can view wild animals. They are usually, more or less, just there. But here, in the jungles of India, you must track them, hunt them out, try to be a bit more cunning than they are. It's not easy. But it's such a lot of fun.

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The day starts early at Banjar Tola. A wake up call, a cuppa and bikkies at 5.15am. (But my advice is, don't drink the tea. There's but one set of 'loos' in the park and you're out for a six hour safari. It's a real test of retention and, when 'your water starts to hit the eyeballs', as David says, even the most basic, really awful patch of ground surrounded by a bamboo 'wall' is welcome - and there are only two of them, kilometers apart! Otherwise you are not permitted out of the vehicle. This is, after all, tiger and leopard country!)

Back to the day! A bowl of porridge, with whisky if you like to warm you up in the freezing cold morning temperatures, and a banana and you're on your way to the park entrance in the 'gypsy' with our driver and naturalist, Harsha. Pay and pick up a ranger at the gate - this gives work to the locals whose villages have been moved to make the National Park people free. They know the jungle and have the knowledge and a sixth sense to find animals.

In the early morning the meadows, where the villages used to be, are wreathed in mist. It's very cold but truly beautiful. A swamp deer stag and a couple of females appear in the mist. All is quiet and still and mysterious.



The swamp deer were all but wiped out when the national park was formed. A breeding enclosure was built and now the twenty have become four hundred and wander freely in the park building up the numbers in the natural way. The rutting season has just begun. We saw males in the swamps calling and throwing great swags of grass onto their antlers to attract females.

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Early in the morning, elephants and their drivers head out in search of tigers to help the safari drivers to pin point areas where tigers are to be found. There are something like eighty tigers in the park but most are very elusive.



Drivers stop and swap notes along the way - a footprint here, a call there.

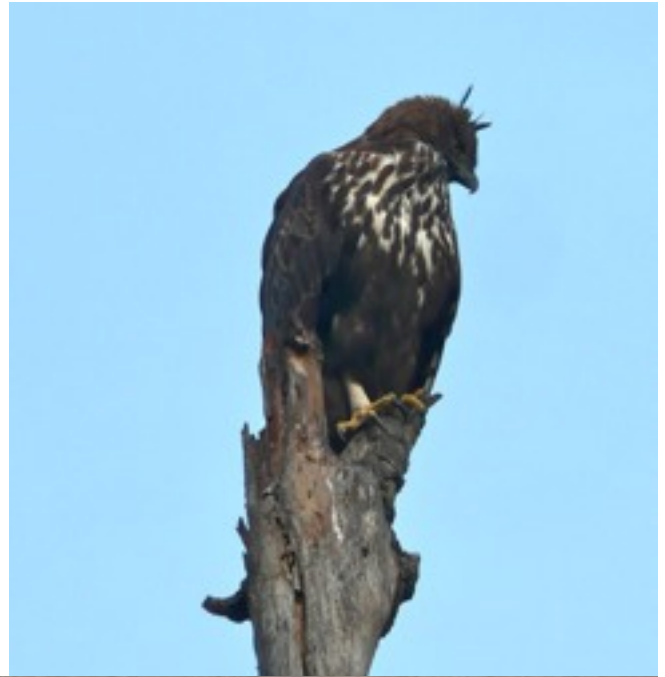


The most easily found animals are the spotted deer. They tend to be in open areas where they have a chance to see or hear a predator. They stay fairly close to troupes of monkeys, delightful black faced langurs. They can see further from the trees and give out the first warning calls, especially if a leopard is about. They don't worry so much about tigers - but leopards can climb! The monkeys are also messy eaters and drop leaves and seeds to the ground which the deer enjoy. Both monkeys and deer are a delight to watch and when all is quiet in the forest areas they are never far from a track and give pleasure any time. But when tiger hunting is on in earnest, we were to only stop to watch them if we saw 'a monkey and a deer dancing together'. That would be a world first!



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There are many birds in the park. Many are raptors of one kind or another, but there are also three kinds of parakeets, (we've seen two so far) and several ducks like these whistling ducks who had their roost safely out in a small swamp. We even saw a woodpecker rushing up and down a tree trunk. David, ever the observant one, spotted a tiny jungle owl with the most beautiful feathers and amazing yellow eyes. Even if we haven't found a tiger yet, there's always plenty to find, observe and enjoy in Kanha NP.



A common feature in the forest areas are termite nests. When these are broken you know that a sloth bear has been around for a feed. But we have yet to see one.



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The morning safari finishes at noon when the park is closed for three hours. Just time for a shower, rest and lunch before heading back to the park. On one afternoon safari we saw the huge guar, the largest bovine in the world, the 'mother of all cows'. At first we discovered one large male coming down to drink from a small stream. How fantastic we thought.



Then lo and behold, further into the park we turned a corner and there was a herd of them - mothers and babies and another big male. How lucky was that!



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Another lucky sighting was this beautiful female sambal deer with big ears. The male is darker and so regal, so stately. We have only seen him in the dusk when it was too dark to film. I think he's my favourite. But maybe not.



Maybe my favourite was a most unexpected and not often observed sighting. We were in a far corner of the dense jungle area of the park, simply enjoying the beauty of the bamboos and the old sal trees. All was quiet. It was time to go or we'd be late back to the park gate - an unforgivable sin! Then, rather faintly we heard a monkey's alarm call. Too late. We had to go. Just as we moved off, the quiet was shattered by a very agitated, screaming, squawking



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monkey just over our heads. Leopard nearby, said our fantastic driver/naturalist, Harsha. But where? Well just there actually. Right beside the car. A meter or so away, partially hidden by a bush. We watched and waited as it moved very quietly ahead of us. We rolled forward, cameras at the ready. A head popped out from the screen of bushes. A cautious look around. We stood in the car, still as statues. Then the moment we'd been waiting for. That magnificent animal stepped out onto the track, looked, saw us and headed away and back into the bushes. But we had all seen him and caught him on film. It was a magic, heart stopping moment! Absolutely wonderful.



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But still no tiger after five long safaris. And wouldn't you just know it! I had to have a rest morning before our long drive to Pench NP this afternoon. David and Harsha went out for a shorter Safari and what does David see - and from the back of an elephant - a tiger!!!! The mother of three cubs, she had made a kill this morning and was found by the elephant drivers. David even had a glimpse of one of the cubs. Well done.



And there we must leave Kanha NP for the moment. Maybe I'll see one of these magnificent wild animals in Pench NP. We have five safaris there where the terrain is a bit more open and the chances thus a bit better.
Love to all Jennie

