

Day 39, - 13th Dec 2009 Safaris Pench NP

Our hunt for those ever elusive tigers and even more elusive leopards moved from the very dense green Sal forests of Khana NP to the much drier teak forests of Pench National Park. Our first foray into this park was on Sunday when we had to share the forest trails with about sixty other vehicles full of 'Sunday visitors' and we had to stay only in designated sections of the park.



But, with our very experienced naturalist/driver Karun in charge of our safari wagon, your erstwhile tiger hunters were ready for the day's work.



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The theory is that it should be easier to spot tigers in Pench NP without the dense undergrowth that had given them such protection in Kanha NP. But nature designed these wonderful animals to be able to melt into their surroundings very, very effectively. So, with all those vehicles in the forest, we needed the help of the tracking elephants and their mahouts to have any chance at all. We had signed up to ride the elephants if a tiger was found.



We were number six in the queue and there are six elephants, so, when the call came through, we set out in great anticipation. But we were stopped along the way. An alert had gone out about poachers in the lake.

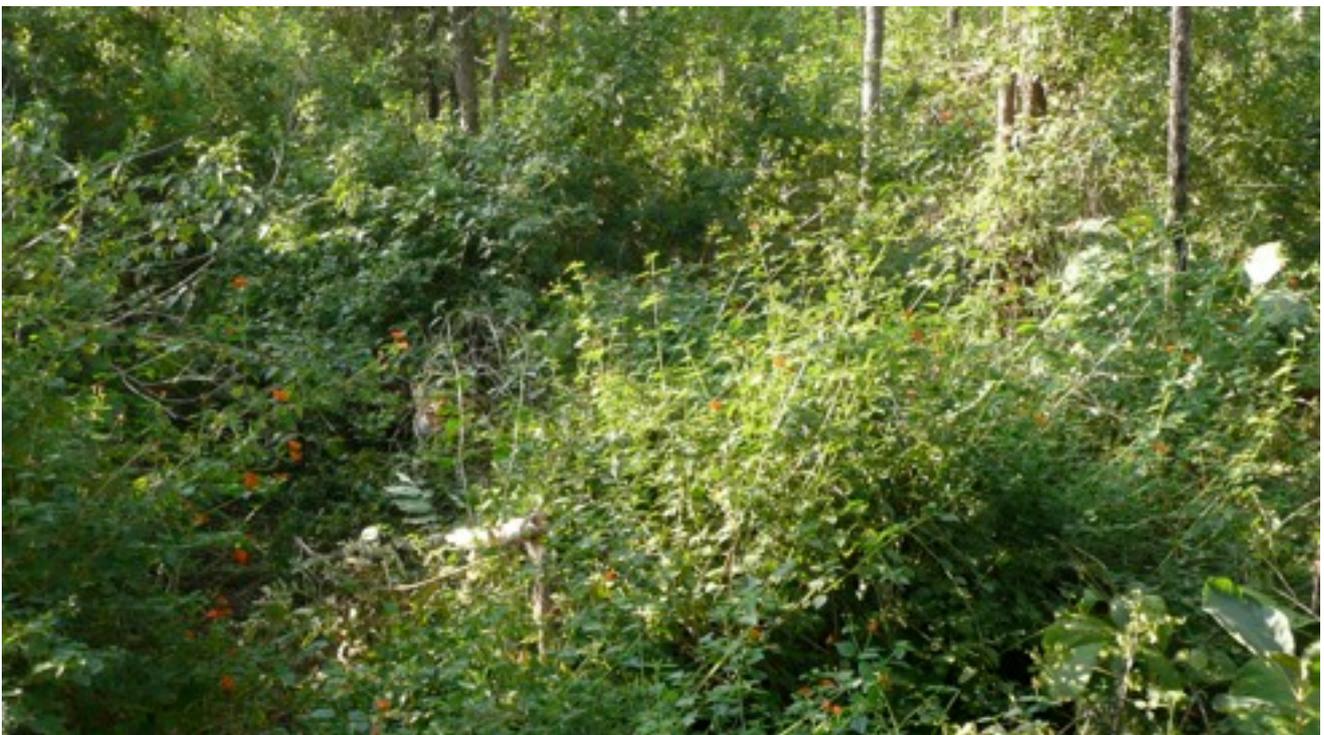


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So we sat on the back burner listening to the walkie-talkie. These poachers were after fish and come out onto the lake in inflated inner tyre tubes. they were a fairly easily pick up for the ranger's motor boat. The fine for entering an NP illegally and for poaching is, we are told, R25,000 which of course is totally out of the question for village folk. So it's gaol for them.



Poachers out of the way, we were given the all clear to head to the elephants. Just to get up onto the elephant was an effort. 'Up' was by a ladder that rested on the elephant's back. It's amazing what a bit of adrenalin will do! After rocking and rolling and crashing through the undergrowth on our elephant, I had my first glimpse of a wild tiger. So just where is 'Tigger'?





There were four of them... three males and one female. One male growled his 'welcome' and then this female came out towards us. She stayed for a photo shoot and then retired for a sleep. It was totally awesome! They were large animals even though they were only 13 months old. Their mother had obviously gone off to hunt somewhere nearby - and she must be a very good hunter to raise four healthy cubs. She is the sole provider for five animals.

But she comes from good stock. Did you see that David Attenborough film about tigers filmed with hidden mobile cameras? I think it was called Tiger Spy. It was filmed over three years here in Pench NP. The mother of our cubs was herself a cub in that film. Her mother had also raised four young,

two male, two female.

This is quite remarkable and shows the benefit of the protection they receive in these tiger reserves such as Pench NP.



And elephants like our Amrika help to keep them safe, too.

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After our ride, the elephants (and the tigers) had a bit of a rest. This one used it's rest time to strip the bark off a tree and enjoy the treat. I'll swear it was smiling! But there were many more vehicles lined up for a turn so we left knowing that I had at last seen my first wild tiger - in fact, I had seen four. And that was thanks to the mahouts and elephants. We had viewed tigers but as yet had not found our very own tiger in the forest. We would have to inspect the dust pads on the forest trails to help find animal tracks and interpret them. But that would have to wait a day. I was due for a much needed massage. Oh how good that was after all the driving on rough roads and tracks. My back said a very big thankyou as I lay there and thought about my tigers! Jennie

