

Day 40 - 14th Dec 2009 Safari 2 Pench National Park



The morning was crisp and cold but sighting spotted deer grazing quietly in the misty forest was enough to cheer anyone including cold, freezing me. Even though I had two hot water bottles and was wrapped in two blankets and wore several layers of clothes, it was cold as the air whistled past me in the open top van. But the cold air did not trouble my ears. They were cocooned safely in a pair of wonderful Indian ear muffs given to me by Karun.

We stopped at the back waters of the lake which looked as cold as I felt.

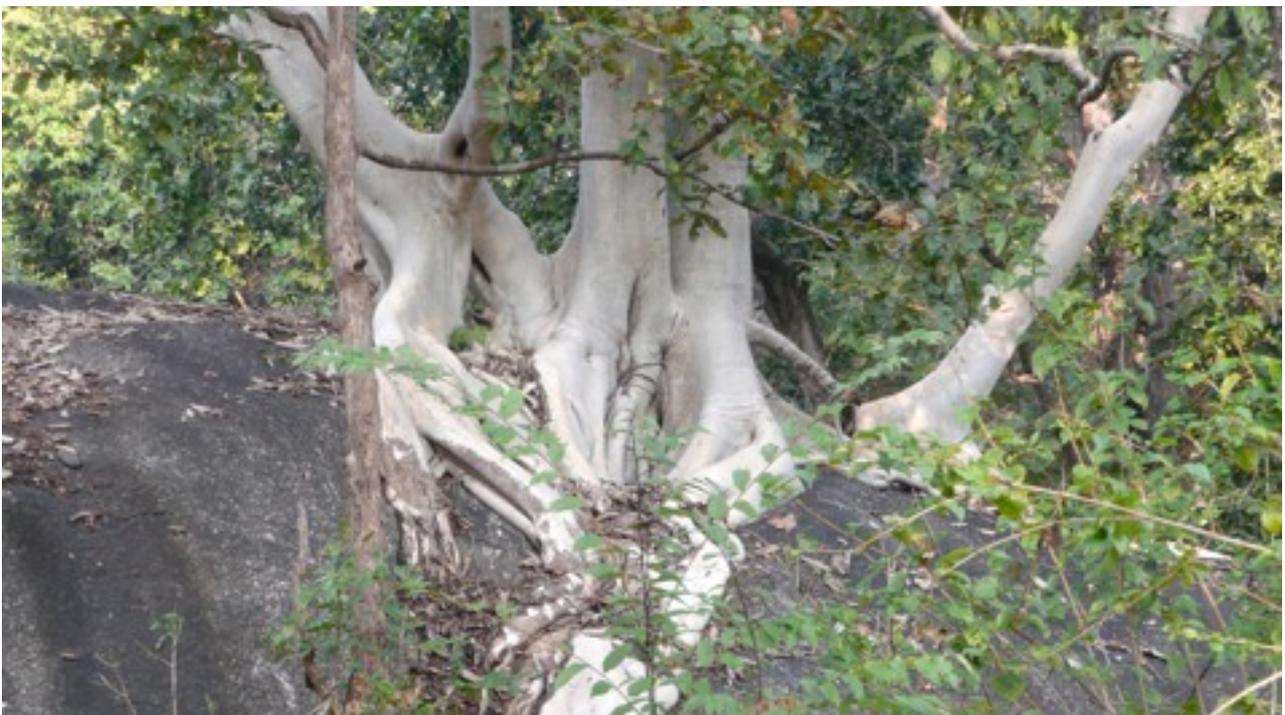


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We were one of only five or six vehicles in the park so we had free access to all tracks today. As we headed much further into the forest, there was to be no stopping for deer or monkeys unless they were in the mouth of a tiger!



Gradually the sun began to penetrate the mist; and gradually I warmed up. We were heading into sloth bear territory - large shaggy bears that love nothing better than a feed of termites. They tear open a colony with strong claws and then suck out the termites. We found droppings but no bear. This was not a time for star gazing but for 'stool gazing'; an important part of the job of wild animal 'hunting' albeit hunting with nothing more than a camera. We did stop briefly beside this rock hugging fig tree. No, it isn't a tiger, or a leopard or a sloth bear. But it is a rather amazing sight none-the-less.



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All was quiet. Just a few bird calls. We were joined by two of the park guards who live in the forest 365 days of the year and are on call duty 24/7. Karun is really jealous of their job. They know all the animals in their area and are known by the animals. Every facet of the animal's lives are part of theirs. They were on their way to take a plaster cast of a big tiger's foot print and asked us not to go further. They had also seen the sloth bear heading back deep into the forest. So, no point waiting. We'd come back later in the day.



Instead, we headed for the Pench River that flows through the park. It's a really beautiful sight now with the rocks bare. In monsoon time they are covered with raging rapids. But now, it was placid; a place of peace.



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Back in the forest we began to look for things other than tigers, leopards and sloth bears - and very rewarding it was, too. A tree pie took off just as I was about to photograph it sitting in some bare branches. But I caught it in flight.



And you'll have to look really hard, as we did, to see this small yellow pigeon. David was first to spot it but it stayed long enough for us to have a really good look through the binoculars; they are a must in this part of the world.



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He also spied this tiny Eurasian thick-knee under a bush. Just look at that wonderful camouflage!

Above the bird were the lacy, grub-eaten leaves of the teak trees.

And then it was time for a 'pit stop and a bite to eat.... dahl dumplings, muffins, home made bikkies and fruit juice. And right beside us was this safari van with a label on its side that I just couldn't resist!



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As we drove towards the gate on our way 'home', we passed this elephant almost finished it's day's work of tiger tracking. It had one last job though - to carry the wood home to use for the fire to cook its breakfast. The mahout had nothing to report. No sightings at all. All quiet in the forest. No luck today.

Time to set off along the track to home enjoying both forest and peace. A van overtook us and made a cloud of dust. So we pulled over to let that settle.



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A little further on we saw the footprints of a female tiger. The mother of yesterday's cubs, Karun suggested. It was in her territory. But they lead off into the forest. So we couldn't follow her. We had to stay on the park track.

And then we heard alarm calls. Loud and clear from monkeys, deer and samba. Close by. In the forest on the right. Let's go! Let's check it out.

We turned down a small track towards a dry river bed. The calls came louder - more agitated. We stopped behind a pile of dead branches and waited. But not for long. I was looking far down to the end of the river bed when I saw him. My own, my very own tiger. What an adrenalin rush! Cameras swung in his direction and began to click - all except mine. I was too excited to get more than a blur. But Karun took a good one for me! And an important find this was too. The very first sighting of a new tiger in the area! What an animal!

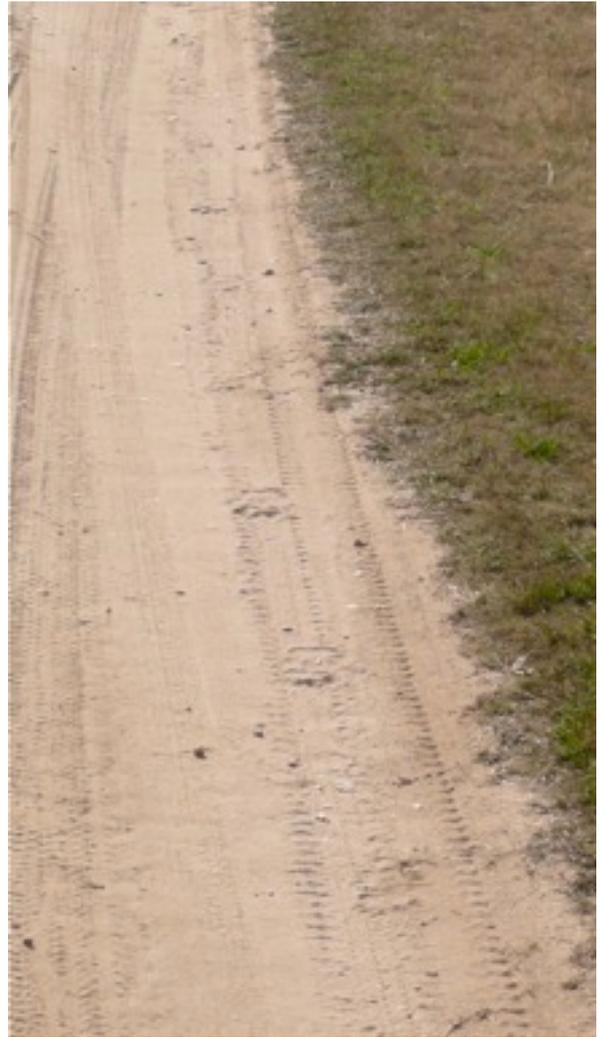


Photo taken by Karun Verma b-
Pench NP 14/12/2009
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Karun had seen the footprints of this tiger a few days before in the river bed behind our lodge. But no sighting had been made of the actual animal. He's a very large male and is obviously trying to set up his territory, both inside and outside the park. We had heard loud alarm calls during the night. He must have been on the prowl then. And now we were the ones to find him.

Our sighting was only 100 meters from the park gate so you can imagine the excitement when we got back to tell the other guides and rangers. And back at the house no-one could contain their excitement. This was not just finding a tiger - this was finding a NEW tiger! And he was my tiger! Sure he had turned and run away when he saw us. But male tigers are shy and that was typical behaviour. But we had seen him long enough for Karun to be able to identify him and for David to get some worthwhile video footage - and for me to have the most exciting morning of the trip. What a morning!

And there are two more safaris to go before we leave our 'home away from home' here at Baghvan in Pench National Park. Anything could happen!

And now it's time for us all to have a celebratory glass of champagne to wet the newly found tiger's head and to enjoy our last dinner in the jungles of India - for this trip at least!

Later: The staff had organised a surprise for us. Dinner for two on our candle lit deck in the jungle, our table strewn with rose petals. David to have a true Indian dinner and me to have a very simple western one. Just perfect!

Until the next edition of our India diary - it's good night from both of us.

Jennie and David