

TIGER CENTRAL

a summer of tracking tigers in India's heartland



VIHAAN GAYATHRI

*“A tiger without its
forest is like a song
without its melody.”*

FOREWORD

Sumeet Gayathri Moghe

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” - Marcel Proust

My children are my most precious treasures, each with unique personalities and interests. My son, Vihaan, is my best mate on wildlife tours. Parents always hope to bequeath something to their children. I can't deny that I'd like to pass my love for the wilderness to my son.

This summer, I took a short sabbatical from work. It was the first time I spent almost an entire vacation with my kids. In the first leg of the holidays, Vihaan and I braved the heat and travelled to Central India to track our national animal, the Royal Bengal tiger. We visited two of our most famous tiger reserves - Tadoba-Andhari and Bandhavgarh National Park. After 2,500 km of driving, not including the several hours and miles inside the parks, I have a lifetime of memories with my son, some of which he'll share in this photobook.



The world always looks wondrous when you look at it from the eyes of a 10-year-old. Over the following pages, I hope Vihaan's reflections help you experience our trip vicariously. Some of his thoughts may amuse you. Others will intrigue you. And by the end of this short photo story, I hope you, too, can hear the call of the wild.

INTRODUCTION

Vihaan Gayathri



My 2024 summer vacation coincided with my dad's sabbatical. He was off work for six weeks, of which we'd spend three in Central India. We'd first drive to Tadoba-Andhari National Park, spend about ten days there, and then drive to Bandhavgarh National Park for another nine days.

This trip wasn't my first rodeo. In 2019, when I was a shade over five years old, I visited Ranthambhore National Park. I have vague memories of that visit, though I remember getting a bollocking from my dad when I was playing the fool in front of a tiger. I also learned never to doze off during a game drive on that trip. I was a little fellow then, and when I slept off during a dull afternoon, my mom and dad enjoyed the sighting of a mama sloth bear! When he recounted that sighting, my dad said, "You snooze, you lose". That lesson has always stuck with me.

Later that summer, we visited India's first national park, Jim Corbett. We stayed in the heart of the forest and saw two of the Indian Big Five — the tiger and the Asiatic elephant. Those first few wildlife experiences introduced me to the uncertainty, thrill, and anticipation accompanying wildlife tracking. Those emotions accompany me whenever I'm out in any patch of wilderness.

I'm not new to Central India, either. In 2023, my friends and I went to a summer camp in Nagzira National Park. While some of my friends were lucky to spot predators, my luck wasn't great. Some wildlife trips teach you that nature is unpredictable. We must take the rough with the smooth, the good with the bad.

As a team, my dad and I have always had good luck in the wilderness. Even when he drove our car into a big ditch while tailing a pack of wolves. I mean, we did see wolves, after all. In wildlife terms, that's the equivalent of seeing god! This time, however, the car wasn't going off-road, so I was more excited than anxious. Excited, because Tadoba was part of our plan. My friend Vedant had recently

visited the park, and he was almost tripping over tigers on every game drive. I wanted to do one better! But I was also a bit anxious because I didn't know how to deal with the extreme heat.

Long story short, I crossed my fingers and bundled my fears and anxieties into me as I curled into the back seat of our car in the wee hours of March 30, 2024. That's where we began our 800km drive from home to Tadoba National Park. Our first game drive was that afternoon.







THE CENTRAL INDIAN LANDSCAPE

I don't intend this to be a day-by-day account of my trip. If I recount each day we were in the bush, I fear losing you as an audience. So let me tell you things you should know if you were to visit the same places I went to.

Central India has some of the country's largest national parks. These parks feature a tapestry of thick forests, rocky outcrops, bamboo groves, grasslands, meadows, riverine patches, lakes, hills, valleys, and ravines. These parks are also the stronghold of our national animal, the tiger.

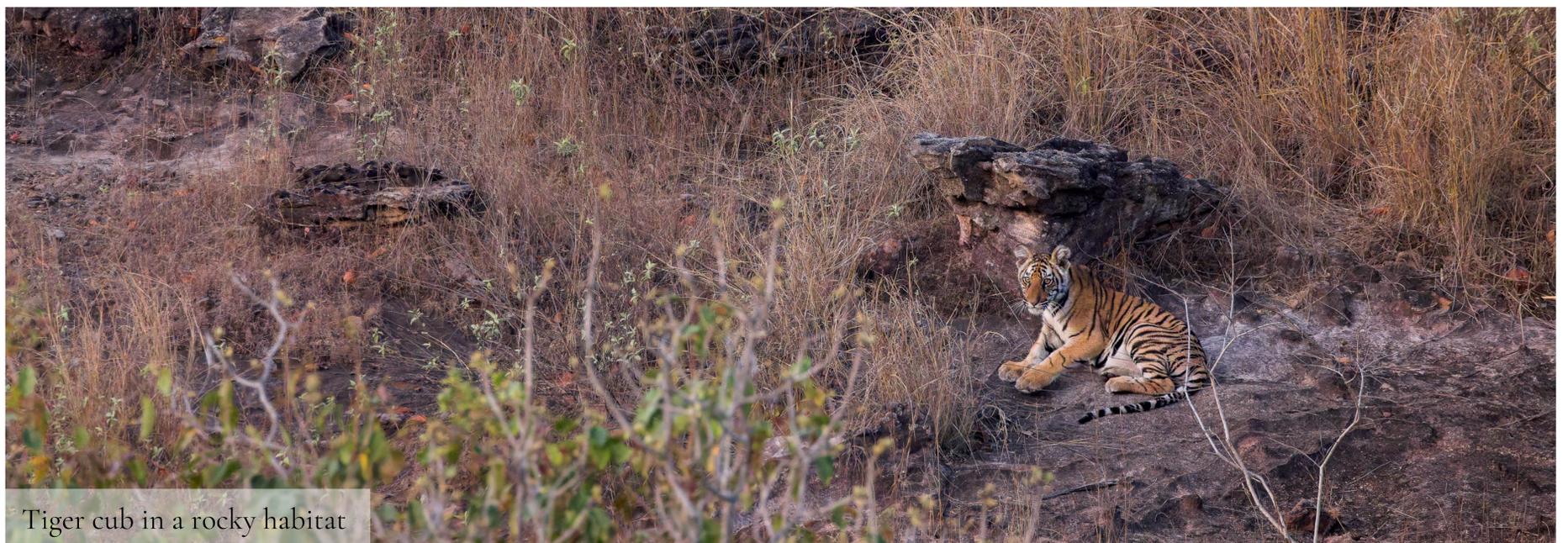
Between Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, this region's national parks are home to over 1,200 tigers. Let me put that number another way:

- One of every three tigers in India is from Madhya Pradesh or Maharashtra.
- One out of four tigers in Maharashtra calls Tadoba home.
- Bandhavgarh is home to 160-odd tigers in an area roughly the same size as Tadoba.

When you notice that two out of every three of the world's tigers prowl the Indian wilderness, you realise how important Central India is to the cause of predator conservation.



Tiger in a woodland



Tiger cub in a rocky habitat



Tiger patrols the forest track



Tiger in a bamboo grove



Tiger at the edge of a meadow



Tiger in a wetland

NAVIGATING THE FOREST

While there are many ways to experience these forests, my favourite activity is the game drive. We hop into the back of the old-school Maruti Gypsy, switch off our mobile phones, pull out our cameras and look for animals in the zones we can access that day. The beauty of the game drive is that you can cover more distance than you can on foot. So, if one patch of the forest isn't lucky for you that day, you can always look for action elsewhere.



Game-viewing vehicles are an easy way to explore a forest

Moreover, animals are less scared of vehicles than humans on foot. After centuries of hunting, animals view humans with suspicion, but the shape of a car masks our silhouettes and appears less threatening to them. For my dad and me, this lack of fear means we can often spend hours with some animals since they're at ease with our presence.



Animals in popular parks are quite tolerant of vehicles

Game drives vs safaris

In India, we often confuse “game drive” with “safari.” There’s a difference between the two. The word “safari” originates from the Swahili word “safara,” which simply means “trip.” Back in the day, European travellers would pack their bags and spend weeks and months exploring the African wilderness. As the idea caught on, “going on safari” became popular. Indeed, East Africa, the home of the Swahili language is also the birthplace of safaris.

On the other hand, game drives are an activity you do when on safari. As the name suggests, you get into a rugged car and look for “game”; i.e. wild animals. The word “game” has a grizzly origin too. To this day, people hunt animals for sport. In that context, animals are “game”.

The ethics of hunting aside, here’s what I want you to remember.

Safaris are the trip. A game drive is an activity you do on the trip!



Asiatic wild dog

THE TIGER'S FOUR – LEGGED SUBJECTS

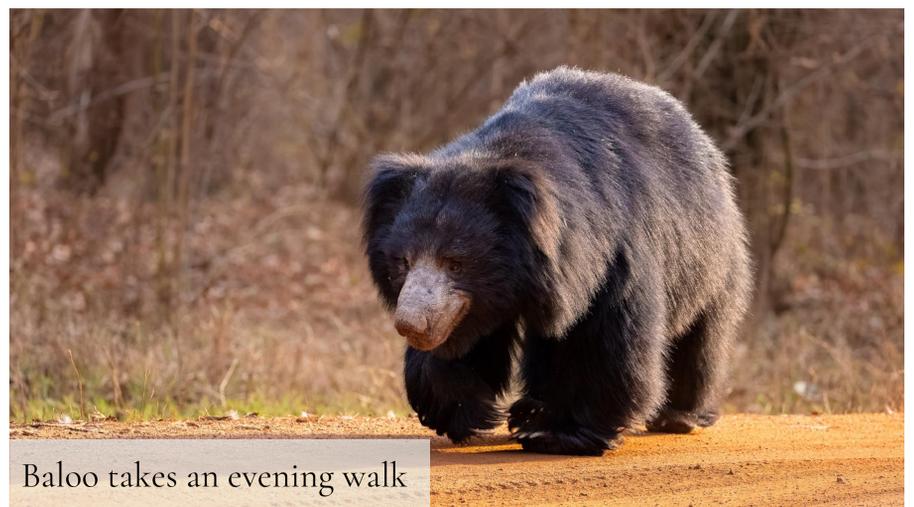


An Asiatic wild dog with its kill

Game drives last anywhere between three to six hours, depending on the forest you visit. Of course, the tiger is the main event, but don't ignore the side shows. At school, we learned about the food pyramid. The tiger sits atop the food pyramid of our forests. A healthy tiger isn't only a magnificent sight, though. It's a sign of a thriving ecosystem. A male tiger has a vast territory - 60 to 100 square kilometres. That's about the size of Panjim - the capital of Goa. A female's territory ranges from 20 to 60 square kilometres. That, my friends, is about the size of Shimla!

Such large territories support many different animal species, from the ubiquitous chital to the massive Indian gaur and from the wily jackal to the charismatic Asian wild dogs. Central India is also Kipling country, and all the characters from *The Jungle Book* are in attendance. We got a good sighting of the lovable Baloo, and the bamboo forests of Tadoba are also home to the ever-stealthy Bagheera.

My dad and I often obsess about finding apex predators, but I've found that observing the signs and stopping for the forest's other gifts can also be rewarding.



Baloo takes an evening walk



A golden jackal stares at us



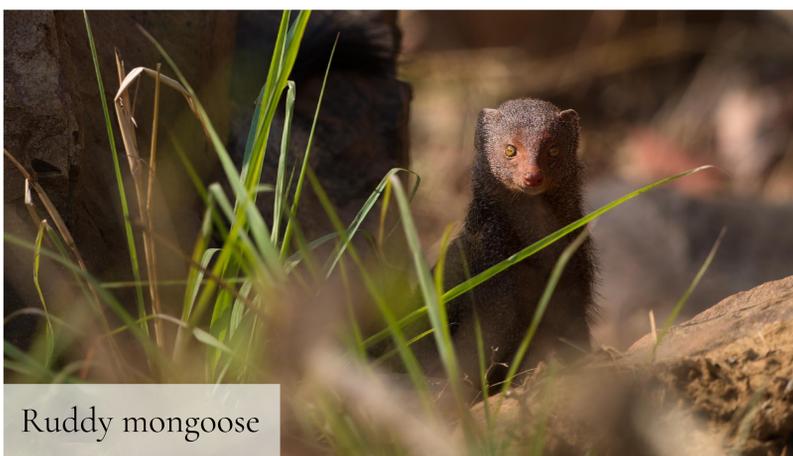
Spotted deer stags fight for mating rights



Indian Gaur – world's largest wild cattle



Yellow monitor lizard



Ruddy mongoose



Jungle cat



Langurs at a patrolling station



In tiger parks, leopards are very shy and make fleeting appearances



If you're lucky, you may spot a black panther (melanistic leopard) too



Barking deer



Sambar deer



Black-naped hare



Mugger crocodile – apex predator of the water



Indian roller

OUR FEATHERED FRIENDS

Speaking of the other gifts, here is an easy way to liven up any game drive. Well, it's simple! Keep your eyes peeled for bird activity. The two forests I visited are home to over 240 bird species. The number of species peaks in winter when the migrants visit, but the residents don't disappoint in summer. Many birds breed in this season, so they carry their finest plumage. The sparse, dry vegetation in peak summer also makes it easier to spot many birds.

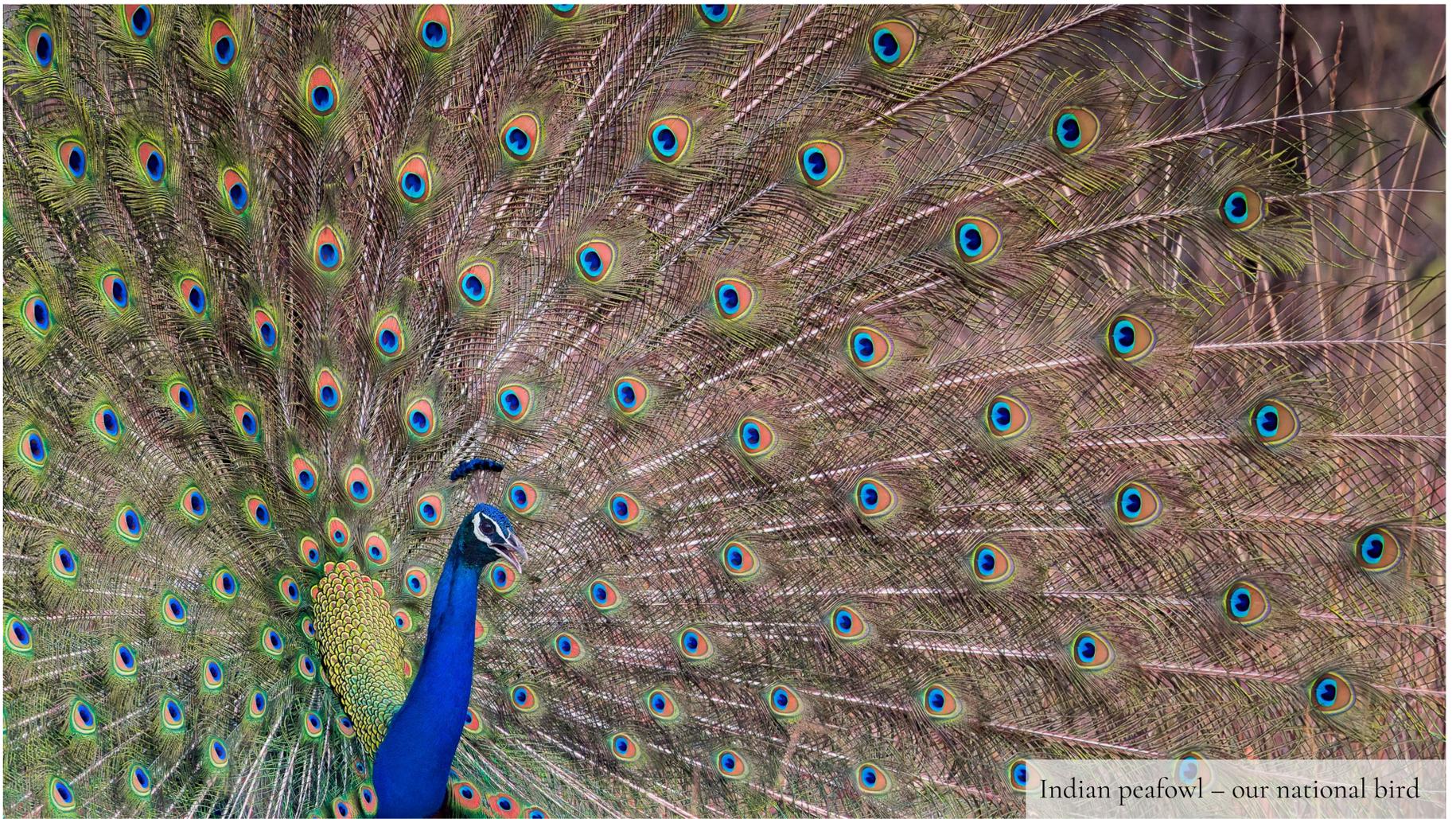
Raptors, songbirds, waders, waterfowl, gamebirds, pigeons and doves are all in attendance. When the tigers didn't show, we kept ourselves busy spotting these birds.

Birding superpowers!

I often tell my friends to get binoculars for a safari. But you know what? We have a few binoculars at home, and I forget to pack them all the time! Thankfully, my dad carries a camera with a long lens, which he uses like a pair of binoculars. Phew! Imagine if we didn't take that gear.

Don't be like me. Pack your binoculars. You'll find birds more quickly than with your naked eye; sometimes, they may even help you find a tiger hiding in its surroundings!





Indian peafowl – our national bird



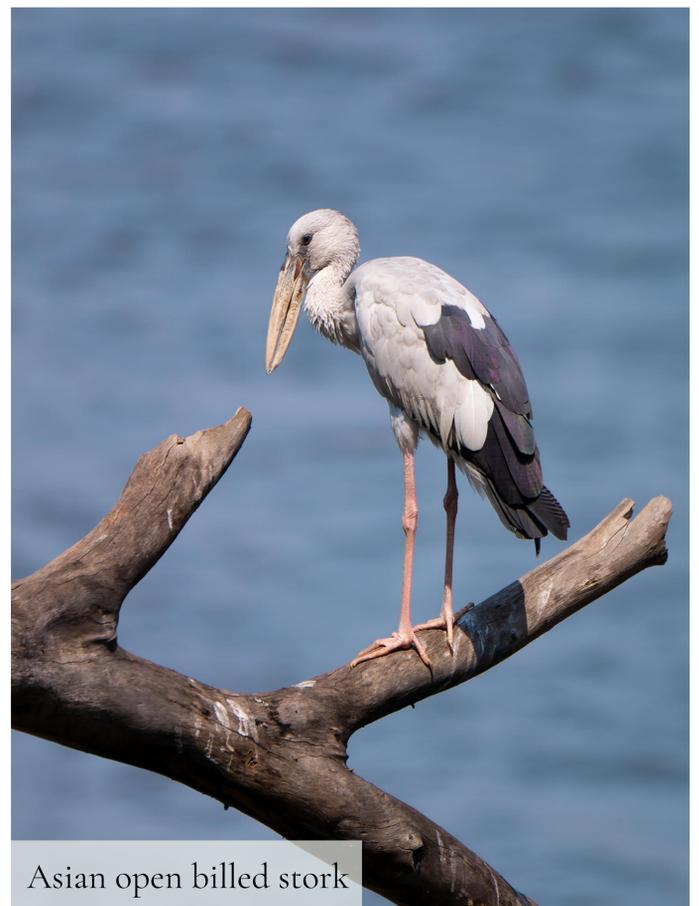
Brown fish owl



Grey-headed fish eagle



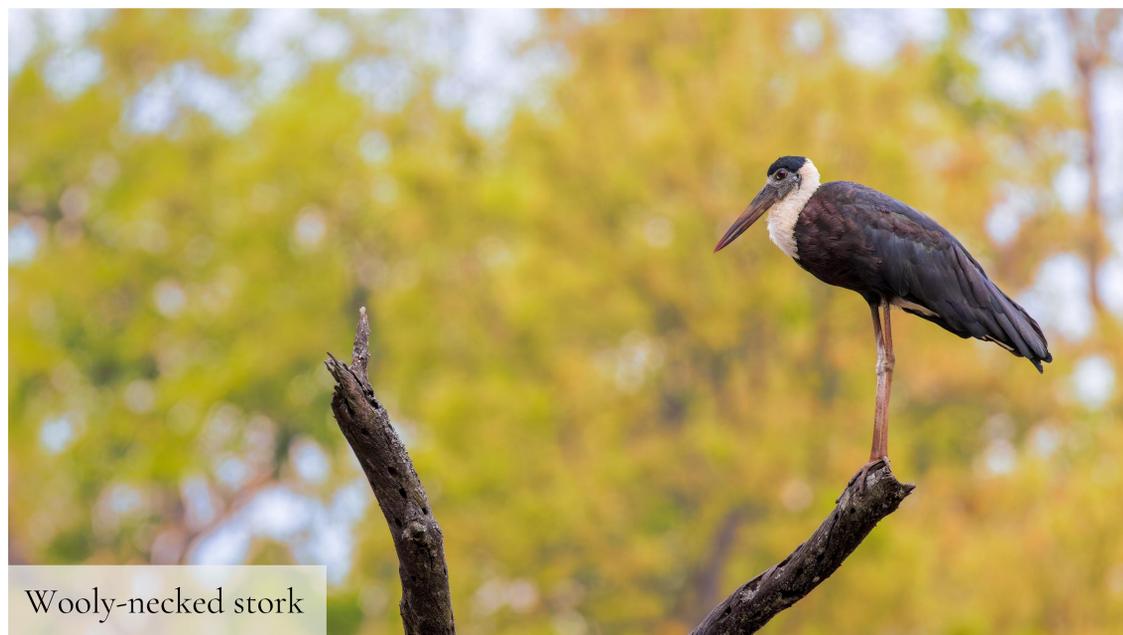
Crested hawk-eagle



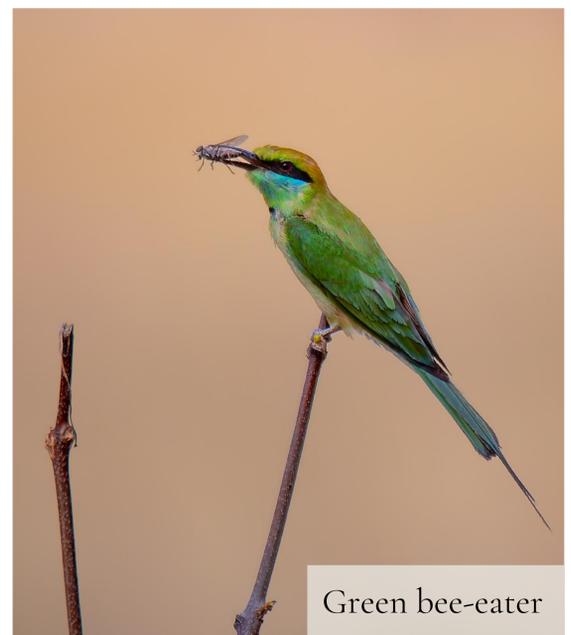
Asian open billed stork



Black-winged kite



Woolly-necked stork



Green bee-eater



Egyptian vulture



Indian vulture – Bandhavgarh has a healthy population of these raptors



PANTHERA TIGRIS – THE MAIN EVENT

Of course, we visit a tiger reserve to catch a glimpse of tigers. My dad and I are not shy about this. We are unabashed cat lovers. When in the parks, we do our best to give ourselves a chance to spot a big cat. More on that later. Before I go on, though, I must explain that seeing and photographing a tiger are two different things.

In parks like Tadoba and Bandhavgarh, tigers don't mind vehicles. You may see multiple cats on a game drive if you're lucky. But since my dad is a photographer, we often linger with a sighting for longer than most people. The advantage is that sometimes a dull sighting can become epic if the animal becomes more active or shows uncommon behaviours. The disadvantage is that we get fewer sightings since each game drive has strict time limits.

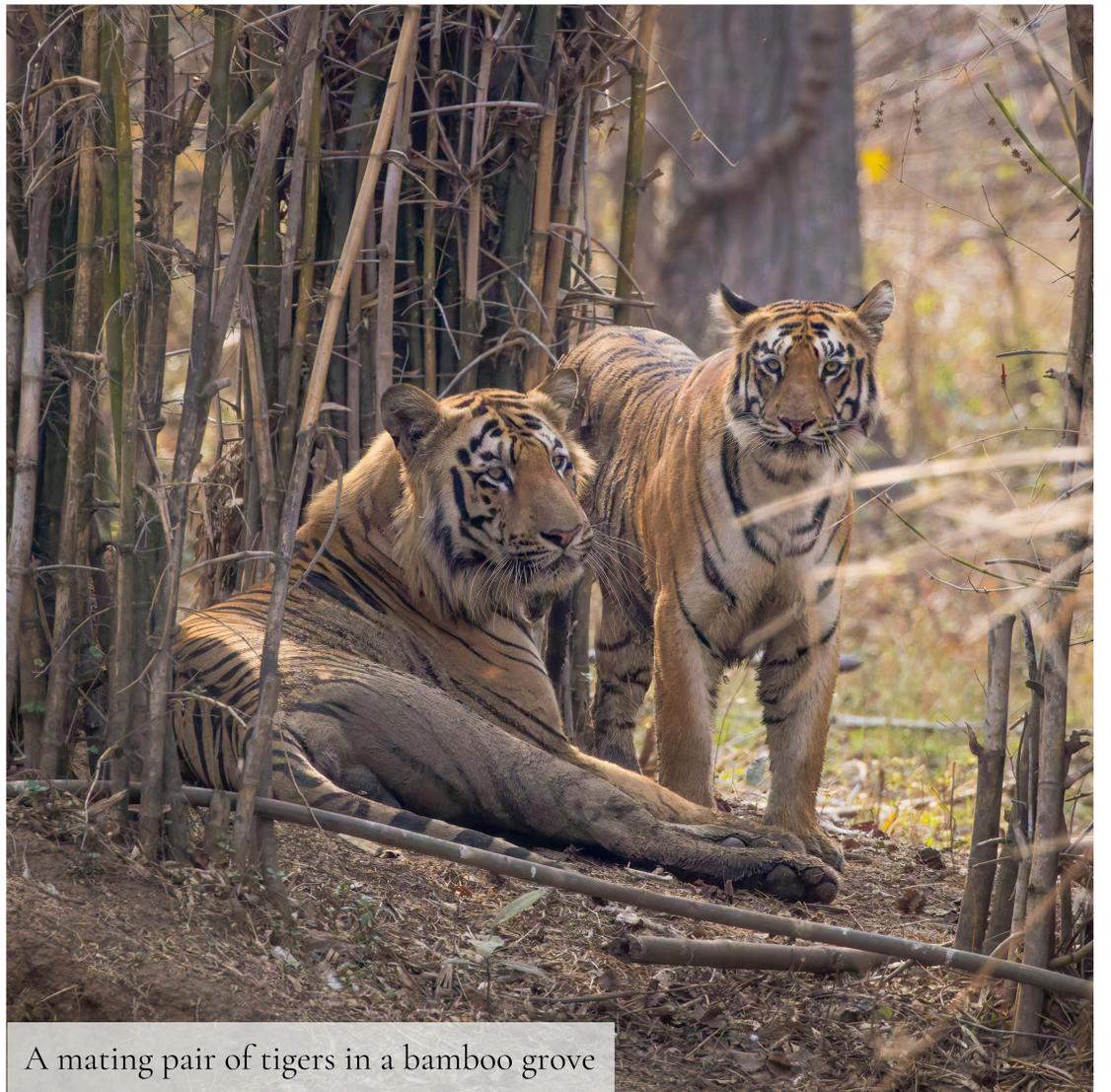


Young tiger cubs at an artificial waterhole

Stick or shoo?

I prefer sticking with an animal instead of driving to find another one. First, there's no guarantee we'll see another animal. You know the story about a bird in hand being better than two in the bush, right? And second, it's kinder to the park and its animals if we're not whizzing about, burning fuel and creating disturbances with a moving vehicle. Of course, the point of a game drive is to get around in a car, but once you find what you're looking for, I suggest staying put and being patient.

On our trip, we saw many tigers. Some were bold, others shy. Some were on hills and cliffs, and others walked around grasslands. The tigers of southeastern Tadoba stayed in thick bamboo groves while we experienced dry, deciduous woodlands in northwestern Tadoba and Bandhavgarh. Each habitat has its charm and challenges. Sometimes, you have a massive cat on the forest track right before you. At other times, you're squinting through thick undergrowth to spot the elusive stripes of a tiger. It can be fun and frustrating within the space of a few hours!



A mating pair of tigers in a bamboo grove

All this said, let me tell you what I learned about tracking tigers. If you visit a tiger reserve someday, you may find my learning handy.

- **Give yourself time.** Sighting predators is a matter of luck. The more time you spend in a forest, the more chances you give yourself. Many of our forests are far from our homes, so don't leave in a rush once you get there! I suggest planning at least three to five days in any park, to give yourself the chance to see some fantastic sights.
- **Don't spread yourself thin.** Popular national parks have many tourism zones. While it is tempting to visit every zone, resist that temptation. By visiting the same zone over multiple days, you'll understand the animal behaviour patterns in that habitat and increase your chances of seeing something splendid.
- **Get in early.** Predators are active when the weather is cool, and early mornings afford you the best chance of spotting them. Once it gets hot, most cats will settle in a cave or deep inside the forest, where you can't spot them.
- **Be the first car.** Yes, the tigers in popular parks are unafraid of vehicles. But they're still shy, solitary creatures. Tigers usually use the forest tracks to patrol their territory. Early in the morning, you stand a solid chance of finding them in the open as they scent-mark trees along the tracks. Once the first car finds them, however, many tigers slink back into the thick bush. That's why you should be the first car in a particular area. Do you know one more advantage of being the first car? Well, all our forests become dusty in the dry season. If you're following another vehicle, you end up eating their dust, and I can tell you that's not a pleasant experience!

•

- **Stake out the waterholes.** In the dry season, water is scarce. Talk to your naturalist and driver to learn about the tigers who frequent that patch of forest and which water sources they prefer. The hotter it gets, the more likely a thirsty cat will approach the water.
- **Be a detective.** Tiger tracking is a bit like being Sherlock Holmes. The forest contains clues; we must piece them together to find the animal we seek. Your naturalist and driver can teach you a lot about these clues. For example, we look for pugmarks on sandy tracks to know if a tiger has been moving about there recently. The more distinct a pugmark, the more recent it is, and the more likely the cat is nearby. Similarly, we often search for a tiger, starting from where people saw it last, instead of driving around randomly.



Tiger pugmarks can tell you where they are headed

- **Stay calm. Seeing a tiger is exciting!** If you haven't seen one, I can tell you that it's one of the most majestic animals out there. But don't make loud noises or big movements while the cat is around. You may scare the animal and cut your sighting short. Instead, speak as little and softly as you can and move slowly. That way, you have the best chance of having an extended sighting.
- **Predict the animal's movements.** A tiger's face is prettier than its buttocks. Instead of following a tiger or driving parallel to it, ask your naturalist where it's likely to go next. Take the gamble and wait at that predicted spot. You'll have a few advantages that way. One, you'll be away from the rest of the cars, who are probably following the animal. Two, you'll give the animal some space by reducing the crowd around it. Three, and this is most important - if the tiger comes to you, you'll have a brilliant sighting. Of course, your predictions could be wrong, and that's fine! You win some, you lose some.

- **Stay as late as you can.** My dad's camera shoots 20 photos each second. A sighting that lasts even a minute can yield memories of a lifetime. In the wilderness, you can't predict when that minute will be. The best you can do is to stay as long as the game drive timings allow. Many sightings happen in the last, fleeting moments of the game drive. So whatever you do, don't leave the forest early!



Thirsty cats will often drink at twilight

Take care of yourself in the bush.

Long hours in the oppressive summer heat can become very uncomfortable. The more uncomfortable you are, the less you'll want to stay out in the heat. A wide-brimmed hat and good sunscreen go a long way in protecting you from the harsh sun. I also suggest carrying an insulated flask with cold water. In the heat, plastic bottles make the water taste awful, and they're bad for the environment, too!





TIGER AHOY!

And that's the scoop on my wild summer in Tiger Central. I hope my experiences have given you a glimpse into the wonders of the jungle and inspired you to embark on your tiger-tracking adventures. Who knows, we may even team up someday. No matter what, when you listen to the call of the wild, Mother Nature will surely have some unique surprises lined up for you.

Remember, the jungle is always waiting, and the tigers are always lurking, waiting to test your patience and skills. The magic of being on safari is like nothing else. The beauty of nature, the wildlife, and our rugged forest landscapes will make you feel like you're living a chapter from Kipling's *Jungle Book*. So what are you waiting for? Embrace the wild, my friends, and let your adventures begin!

*“The forests of India are a
treasure trove of
biodiversity, each tree and
animal a part of our
natural heritage.”*

Valmik Thapar

