



A tiger relaxing in a man-made cemented waterhole, Tadoba-Andhari

IN TIGER COUNTRY

Apart from the striped wonder, India's spectacularly beautiful tiger reserves are inhabited by a large variety of other animals and birds. **Text by Bob Rupani. Photographs by Dhritiman Mukherjee**

A NEW BOOK, TRACKING THE Tiger, celebrates the beauty of India's varied wildlife and showcases a 50-day journey around 13 tiger reserves. In his Author's Note, veteran automotive journalist and wildlife enthusiast Bob Rupani talks about his fascination for India's jungles, his interest in wildlife and what makes this book different from other tomes on Indian wildlife:

I believe the world is divided between people who have seen a tiger in the wild and those that have not. Seeing a tiger roaming free in India's

jungles is an unforgettable sight. What's also special is that our forests are inhabited by a large variety of other animals and birds. India's tiger reserves are spectacularly beautiful and just being in them is a richly rewarding and rejuvenating experience. As I have found so much peace and pleasure in our jungles, I have instructed my family that when I am no more, my ashes should not be immersed in the Ganges; instead they should be scattered over a tiger reserve.

I would like to mention here that my

first real encounter with wildlife was through a film. When I was in Class 4, our school took us to see *Born Free*. The vast expanse of the African plains and the images of the large herds of lovely animals is what actually ignited my interest in wildlife and nature.

My love for wildlife and my frequent visits to our tiger reserves and national parks have been very gratifying. Over the years I have also eagerly devoured wildlife books written by the likes of Jim Corbett, Dunbar-Brander, Kenneth Anderson, Billy Arjan Singh, Valmik

Elephants love throwing mud on their backs, Corbett



A cheetah doe showering tender loving care on her young one, Bandhavgarh

alongside it. Where this book differs from others is that each photograph taken in the reserves carries the day, date and time on which it was taken. The entire photography for the book was done in 50 days. We went into the tiger reserves as regular tourists. No special arrangements were made or sought. We went on paid wildlife safaris in the regular jeeps, just as any ordinary tourist would.

This book provides a fair idea of what a tourist can expect to see in India's jungles. Almost all other wildlife books have photographs taken or compiled over a long period of time. Very often the photographers spend months, if not years, pursuing and photographing the animals. Most have special permissions to visit parts of the reserve not accessible to others and they are also assisted by the various governmental authorities for the photo shoots. In the interest of making this book as 'real and authentic' as possible, we took no such favours. **All of which makes this a unique wildlife book, unlike any other.**

Thapar and Fateh Singh Rathore. I was fortunate to meet both the late Billy Arjan Singh and the late Fateh Singh Rathore, and have vivid memories of the time spent with them.

Thanks to the 'wildlife bug', I became a member of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and their vast library has been a great source of learning as has the Sanctuary magazine

edited by Bittu Sahgal. On my repeated visits to the jungle, I have learnt a lot from simply observing different animals and birds. But I am certainly no wildlife expert like the illustrious writers mentioned above.

I wrote this book simply because I wanted to highlight and share what I think are the best places to see the tiger and all the other wildlife that lives

A leopard snoozing
after a good meal,
Nagarhole





Clockwise from above: An Indian roller sunning itself near a herd of cheetah, Navegaon-Nagzira; the bayonet-like roots of a Sundari tree sticking out above the water level, Sunderbans; a quartet of alert blackbucks, Satpura; and giant mushrooms in an unspoiled and rich jungle, Kaziranga



When a tiger smells another tiger's scent or marking, it wrinkles its nose and lets its tongue hang out. Ranthambore

Tigers in turmoil

India is a land blessed by Mother Nature and few places on our planet can offer the diverse wildlife population that it does. We have over 350 different mammals, about 2,000 species of birds, approximately 500 reptile species, roughly 2,500 species of fish and other marine creatures and more than 25,000 different insects and lesser forms. India is the only nation that is home to the tiger, the lion and the leopard and it also has more types of deer than any other place on earth.

India has always been associated with jungles, wild animals and conservation. In fact Emperor Ashoka forbade the felling of certain trees as early as 3 BC. Forests were also reserved for saints and ascetics to meditate and there were sacred groves around temples where trees were never cut. India's conservation practices and traditions are centuries old, but the ever increasing population

and the growth in the economy are now taking a toll on its natural wealth.

At the turn of the century, it was estimated that the tiger population of India numbered 40,000. But, the first ever all-India tiger census of 1972 revealed the existence of only 1,827 tigers. This set the alarm bells ringing not just in India, but all over the world. The majestic tiger that had been roaming free for over two million years was now declared endangered. In 1972, the Wildlife Protection Act came into force. In 1973, the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, launched Project Tiger and it went on to become one of the most successful conservation projects. Project Tiger and its successor the National Tiger Conservation Authority have strived to maintain a viable tiger population and preserve the jungles of India.

Tiger reserves were created due

to Project Tiger and with the higher protection and better management of resources, tiger numbers went up to almost 4,000. Unfortunately, after the initial success some laxity set in and the authorities were caught napping by poachers and the illegal trade in animal parts. Organized poaching and the demand for tiger skin, bone and other body parts, has had an adverse effect on the tiger population and it has again fallen drastically.

Tigers now not only face the threat of poachers, but also habitat loss and conflict with humans. India hosts over half the world's tiger population. The tiger is one of the world's most spectacular, iconic and endangered species and fortunately conservation efforts are on to protect it. Saving the tiger also means protecting the forests of India along with all the other wild animals that reside in them.