



Striped felines of Ranthambhore **Tiger Reserve**

By N. Shiva Kumar



TRACKING a tiger in the wild timberland is a tantalising task and with tenacity to see the big cat in the jungles, I set out for an adrenaline-rush-adventure to Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve (RTR). The scorching tropical Indian summer heat was hovering at 42-degree centigrade, blazing hot as if the forest was on fire, but it was no deterrent for me.

Tigers, however, are terrific in their tactical demeanour as they are in total control of their temperament despite high temperatures. To beat the heat, they are either in slumber at secluded forest patches or plonked in pools waiting for nightfall to negotiate terrain in their territory. Serious wildlife enthusiasts prefer summer trips as it is comparatively easier to locate a tiger as they

wander around water bodies. Even forest foliage, including ground vegetation, dwindles to a bare minimum making tiger detection easier than usual.

Tackling a tiger in its kingdom on undulating topography is often a game of immense patience. The heat and dust in summer and chilling weather in winters add to the challenge of chasing hidden tigers in Ranthambhore Tiger





Rufous Tree pie: also called the 'tiger's toothpick' the Rufous tree pie is a energetic but beautiful bird belonging to the crow family



Jungle Babbler: a boisterous birds mostly moving in small groups in the undergrowth searching vegetation for insects



Grey Francolin: this partridge is a plump, squat, almost tail-less brown bird with buff pattern on its wings for camouflage

Reserve. Regular tourists treat a tiger with curiosity, while first-timers are scared at the thought of seeing a wild tiger from an open vehicle. Tiger watching is like an addiction to many and I am one of them who are always eager, wanting to taste the thunder and shoot photographs as the big cats embark on their activities. It's even more pleasurable if a tiger mother is with cubs or independent grownup siblings playing pranks with each other in the lake.

Snugly located 14 km from the town of Sawai Madhopur, 150 km from the city of Jaipur and 400 km from New Delhi in the arid Rajasthan state of western India, Ranthambhore is an oasis in the desert. Located at the junction of geologically oldest mountain ranges - Aravallis and Vindhyas, Ranthambhore offers premium

opportunities for viewing the magnificent tiger in the wild. They live in a lavish landscape with a heady mix of rolling hills, rocky cliffs, meandering meadows, streams and lakes which is also home to a diversity of flora and fauna. Apart from the terrific tiger, one can also spot secretive leopards, rare caracal cat, clumsy sloth bear, crocodiles, jackal, fox,

hyena, mongoose, snakes and a variety of birds. The elusive Indian wolf, too, has also been spotted on some occasions.

Once, the royal hunting grounds of Indian *maharajas* and later of the British, tigers were killed for pleasure at Ranthambhore. This stretch of jungle was declared as Tiger Reserve with the intention of safeguarding the supreme



Sambar deer: heavily built, the male Sambar deer has large antlers for safeguarding its harem





ADVENTURE



Ranthambhore topography: with a hill fort in the background the lavish landscape of Ranthambhore is mesmerising



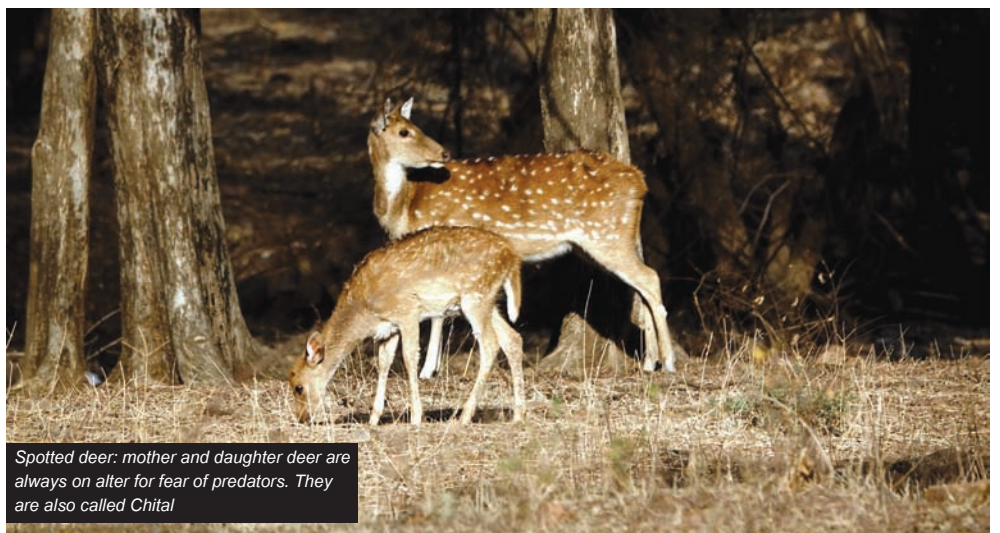
cats that have been vanishing across the Indian subcontinent due to poaching and public encroachments. The ambitious Project Tiger was launched in 1973 to preserve the dwindling population and this started in earnest and woodland wealth in Ranthambhore regained its original vigour. Surprisingly aquifers in the area began to replenish and water tables increased much to the advantage of the surrounding villagers. Even now, the difference in the ecology inside Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve and outside is staggeringly evident to visitors to the park.

The government of India used to issue hunting permits until 1969, but Indira Gandhi, former Indian Prime Minister, and Kailash Sankhala, the then Director of the Delhi

Zoo, demanded safety for the beleaguered tigers. Fortunately, Fateh Singh Rathore, a passionate forester fostered this forest to its pristine self by preparing a perfect plan for protection of jungles. This involved shifting of 20 villages from inside the park and convincingly rehabilitating rustic folk by 1976-77 when all

the villages were moved out and tigers began to move in. In 1980, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was a regular guest, made Ranthambhore National Park famous as a wildlife destination for tourists wanting to see the tiger.

The tropical tapestry of jungles in Ranthambhore provides enough prey for



Spotted deer: mother and daughter deer are always on alert for fear of predators. They are also called Chital





Nilgai antelope: an athletic antelope, the horse-like male stands tall at five feet with steel grey colouration hence is also called as blue-bull

tigers in the form of the dainty spotted deer (Chital), bulky Sambar deer, hefty horse-like Nilgai (blue-bull) antelope, Rhesus macaque, Langur monkeys etc. Even basking crocodiles in the three lakes of Ranthambhore have been hunted by a certain courageous tiger which is considered rare. Tigers also manage to kill a wild boar and wild bear if they get a chance to run them down but their preference to monkey meat is evident. As ample prey animals thrive in the jungles of Ranthambhore, tigers are generally healthy and wealthy to trigger regular breeding with prolific progeny.

Currently, the tiger population is 25 males and 25 females with 15 cubs in tow. However, cubs are not included in the population

count, says Y.K. Sahu, Chief Conservator of Forests, Wildlife and Field Director, Project Tiger Ranthambhore. Tigers, in general, give birth to a litter of two to four of which one or two tend to survive to adulthood, and all four survive if the mother is a good hunter. Because the survival rate is high, Ranthambhore has

become a natural breeding hub for wild tigers. The increasing number is one of the reasons that tigers seem to spill over from the designated boundaries of the Tiger reserve. Bountiful breeding of tigers have helped select young adults to be shifted, literally airlifted, to nearby wildlife sanctuaries where tigers have disappeared due to poaching or poisoning. As in the case of Sariska national park which is about 170 km from Ranthambhore, tigers were reintroduced and are prospering with offspring.

Today, Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve sprawling over 700 sq km is one of the greatest success stories of wildlife conservation in the world. Tigers are mostly loners and designed to dominate, however, they come together to mate. In recent years, Tigers have been treating tourists with interesting encounters and



Tiger Tourists: hordes of foreign and Indian tourists in open jeeps eagerly waiting for the tiger to emerge from the tall trees

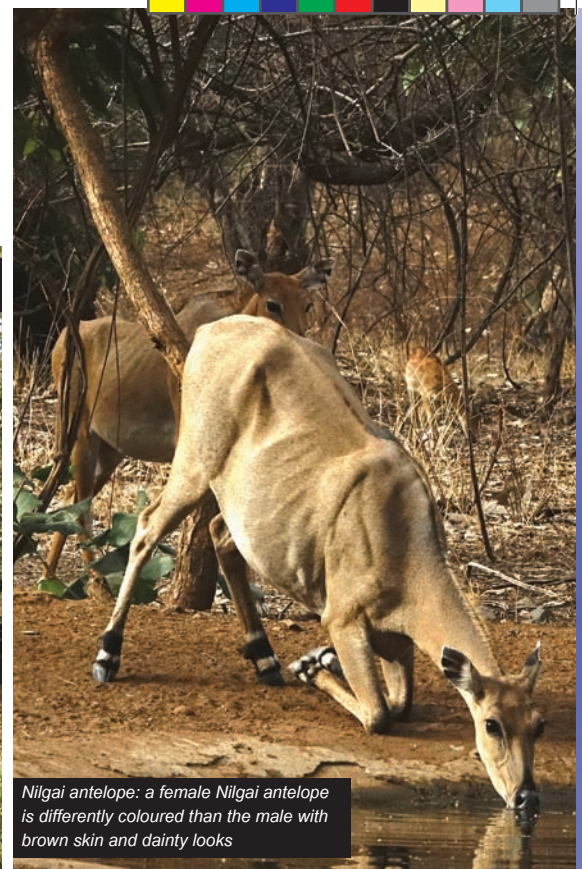




ADVENTURE



Rolling Landscape: a stream flows between hills and dales in the scenery of Ranthambhore



Nilgai antelope: a female Nilgai antelope is differently coloured than the male with brown skin and dainty looks

some have become legendary in their demeanour and daily catwalks. Numerous books and documentary films have been produced on the famous tigers and tigresses that thrive in Ranthambhore. Correspondingly, the number of budget and luxury hotels has cropped up to cater to the growing tiger tourism. Many modern conservation initiatives taken by the strong 365 strong workforce of forest department have increased the inflow of Indian and foreign tourists to a 490,842. This has brought annual returns of Rs 337,728,080 for 2017-18 which is way ahead of all other national parks and sanctuaries in India.

On any given day, at the crack of dawn, a long line of 4x4 vehicles are loaded with eager tourists wanting to see the striped felines. Each vehicle

is steered by a driver and guide to ply on allotted routes from 1 to 10 going to different zones that are conducted in mornings and evenings. Lucky tourists can have fleeting glimpses or long encounters with tigers, while others may come back disappointed, so make sure to take more trips for better sightings. For those who think travel is more than visiting new landscapes, there are premium trips of half-day and full-day tours by jeeps for tourists with the freedom to go across any zone from 1 to 10 inside the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve. Tourism provides economic imperative and best reason for protecting Tigers, in the process, we invariably protect the 'ecological services' rendered by the biodiversity of forests. To make your holiday picture perfect with a breath

of fresh air, go to see the cool cat and it will elevate you to an enchanting engagement.

When I am blunted by the daily drudgery of the corporate world, you can find me roaming in Ranthambhore indulging in the ingredients where the tigers flourish.

All photographs by N. Shiva kumar



N. SHIVA KUMAR is an independent scribe and trigger-happy photographer focussed on wilderness, wanderlust and ancient monuments. He has published 700 articles embellished with 1000 photographs in print media including an award-winning coffee-table book on Ecology. He has choreographed five international photo exhibitions and held two solo Photo-exhibitions in New Delhi on Birds and Asiatic Lions. Accomplished 100 travel trips in 20 years covering six lakh kilometres of road journeys and intend to package the experiences into a book.

