

Rain, grass and tigers

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The clouds were piling up when we entered Kanha national park. The air was already cooler than the morning. We went first to the spot where the last couple of days a tiger had guarded its kill— a large Gaur. The stench was strong, but the meadow was full of grazing Chital. Clearly no tiger here anymore.

Our guide was an older man called Ashok— thin, with a peppery beard. Javed was driving, and Devraj sat next to him in the cab. In the open rear section of the jeep, Doreen and I were in the front seats; Radiya and Pranati, in the back. We drove around and spotted a mixed herd of Barasingha and Chital in a far meadow. On the other side of the road a lone female Sambar watched us warily. Ashok suggested moving to Kanha maidan. As Javed turned the jeep around, the Sambar fled.

It was a little after a half past five in the afternoon. A few fat drops landed on us. I covered my binoculars with a piece of cloth. It was a quiet afternoon. As we drove through the sal forest towards Kanha maidan, Doreen spotted a ruddy mongoose in the thicket. We had a glimpse of the creature fleeing, the black ring visible on the tail it dragged behind itself.

The drops kept falling. The wet earth released that peculiarly refreshing smell that the first rains bring. The forest seemed to relaxed; even the brain-fever birds had stopped calling.

We spotted a peacock on a tree; and then, on the far side of a puddle of water, a couple of spotted pigeons. We passed a little pool where we had stopped after the morning's tiger show and watched a little turtle munching on weeds as fish revealed themselves by expanding circular waves on the still surface of the water. The pool was quiet now. Nothing in sight.

We glimpsed a group of three Gaurs a little way inside the woods. Someone told us later about the local legend that if you see a black animal then

you meet a tiger.

We emerged into the Kanha maidan. Rain clouds were massed before the sun. The spectacular rays of sunlight which are sometimes called “God’s Fingers” reached out from behind them to the zenith. A mellow light illuminated the dry straws of grass that covered the meadow. The rolling flatness of the landscape was broken by very few trees as the perspective receded to the forest on one side and highlands on the other. In the folds of the flat ground we could see herds of Chital grazing. We stopped to take a few photographs. The serene quietness would not be captured on film. We drove on towards Schaller’s Hide which lay beyond a ridge around a bluff that we could now see.

Sometimes, when several things happen at once, your consciousness leaps from one to another, taking in each thing. Call it quick time. As we rounded the bluff I went into quick time. Several jeeps were jammed together on the road. We sped through, curving past the bluff into view of the ridge beyond. I saw someone throw down an empty packet of Lay’s and started sputtering. Doreen pointed out a serpent eagle passing close overhead— the bars and other dark markings on the light umber coloured ground clearly visible as it soared to the top of the bluff. A driver told Javed that a tiger had just made a kill, and Devraj spotted it immediately.

Back to normal time. Radiya and Pranati spotted the tiger as soon as Devraj pointed at it. I missed it. Devraj said it had descended a nullah and would emerge slightly up-slope. We looked, and there it was— foreshortened as it headed directly away from us. In a moment we saw that it had a Chital hanging from its jaws. It made its way steadily up the slope. It was strong. At the top it stopped and looked directly back at us once, before disappearing over the skyline.

Javed raced around the ridge and came across a long line of jeeps on the other side of the bluff. Some had clearly preceded us from around the ridge. They were full of people with binoculars scanning the ground just below the top. But more than a half of the jeeps were parked on the other side of the road, to our right, looking away.

Strange, I thought, as Javed inched ahead to find a good view. “Strange”, said Radiya, “what could they be looking at?” There was Arti in her distinctive russet shirt in one jeep. Marge was identifiable by her fancy straw

hat in another. And they were both looking into the tall grass away from the ridge. Doreen figured it out. “Isn’t this where people saw the tiger cubs yesterday?” she asked. Indeed it was.

We counted three of the five jeeps in our party, including us. It turned out that one more had spotted the cubs but had left a little before we arrived. They had even heard the alarm calls of the Chital as they left, but had not come back to investigate. The fifth jeep never came to Kanha maidan that evening. We were the only people in our party who were lucky enough to stumble on the site of the kill and follow the lead to the cubs.

Later, at the hotel, we met a family who were luckier still. They had seen the chase and the kill, and even managed to take a video of the tigress dragging the kill across the road on the other side of the bluff, just before we arrived. They were the only people we met who had followed in its entirety this common, but engrossing, story in the natural history of the tiger.

Meanwhile, the collection of people was becoming a circus. One jeep, unaccompanied by any guide, drove into the grass, and turned back only when guides from other jeeps threatened to report him. Far back on the road, a car started blowing its horn. Ahead of us a child ambled out of a car on to the road, followed soon by a parent harried by his guide into picking it up and retreating behind a slammed car door. A cacophony of voices and other human noises made me fear that the tiger would not come out of the grass again.

But this was a tigress which had killed for its cubs. Not even a road full of humans could keep it away. Radiya, Doreen and Pranati were perched on the jeep’s superstructure, and I had to crane my head around them. Devraj suddenly spotted the tigress in the grass, rather close to us.

She was a majestic sweep of striped orange yellow, perhaps ten feet from nose to tip of the tail. Her head down, she strode fearlessly parallel to the road on our left. A few jeeps ahead of us there was a gap in the line of vehicles. She lifted her head, spotted the gap and headed straight for it.

I lost sight of her, but moved to the right of the jeep. There, down an incline, bounded a couple of frisky tiger cubs, the one behind batting at the

leader with its paws. They were a few months old, and much lighter in colour than the mother. There was more white showing, perhaps because they were coming down towards us. It was remarkable how their colouring camouflaged them in the tall dry grass.

Meanwhile the tigress had crossed the road and was visible again. It came to the cubs. A third had appeared by now. She licked her cubs a couple of times and then turned around and crossed the road again. I squeezed into the perch above the jeep and got a clear view of the crossing.

An expanse of about twenty feet of the road was free of vehicles. The tigress padded confidently across the open red earth with two cubs jumping up and down next to her, trying to lick her face, falling back in the attempt, and then scrambling to catch up. The third was lost momentarily, and then scuttled across to join her mother on the other side of the road. Seeing it coming, one of other cubs turned to jump at it. They gambolled off to the side, heading for a clump of grass directly in a line towards us. They raced each other around the clump and swung back to the mother.

They continued walking parallel to the road towards the well-hidden kill that the mother had brought to her family. The humans seemed to be in the grip of an enchantment. People were laughing, some clicking away with their cameras. Others were clutching each other. Radiya was waving at the tigers saying "Hi. Look at me". For a moment the mother stopped and gazed at us across the gulf of evolution. Then, the four resumed their walk. Slowly and silently they vanished into the grass.