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Tadoba

DIARIES

The Official Newsletter of Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve



Praveen Pai

Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve
Conservation Foundation, Chandrapur

30/-

SUMMER AT TADOBA

Dear Reader

The past month has been marked by a whirlwind of activity and challenges for our team, primarily driven by the looming threat of fires exacerbated by soaring temperatures. Concurrently, it ushered in the season of Tendu leaf collection, a vital yet precarious endeavour for local communities nestled in and around forested regions. This seasonal tradition not only supplements the income of numerous families but also underscores the critical need for concerted efforts and cooperation among villagers to avert fire incidents during this period.

Remarkably, the government of Maharashtra has taken a laudable step by committing to allocate the entire royalty earned from Tendu leaf collection directly to the collectors, without retaining any portion as revenue. This move not only acknowledges the significance of this activity but also ensures a more equitable distribution of resources among those dependent on it.

However, recent developments, particularly the surge in tiger populations across forested areas, pose a considerable risk to Tendu leaf collectors, who often traverse deep into the forests during dawn and dusk, prime times for wildlife activity. While the forest department has diligently endeavoured to regulate human movement within these habitats, advocating for group ventures and adherence to safety protocols, unfortunate incidents have occurred, resulting in human casualties in certain districts.

Moreover, the emergence of a new generation of tigers, with tigresses nurturing litters of 3-4 cubs, underscores the evolving dynamics within these ecosystems. As these young tigers mature and prepare to venture into new territories, the forest authorities face the daunting task of mitigating potential conflicts between these dispersing animals and human settlements along their paths.

In one such instance, within our northern buffer area, the venturing of dispersing tiger cubs into villages culminated in a fatal attack on a villager. Prompt action was taken to capture one of the cubs and relocate it to the rescue and rehabilitation center in Gorewada, Nagpur, the state's premier facility dedicated to handling such cases.

To better understand and monitor the dispersal patterns of young tiger cubs, plans are underway to outfit select

individuals with radio collars before the onset of the monsoon. Concurrently, efforts to translocate tigers from Tadoba to the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve and Rajasthan aim to bolster the tiger population in these regions while enhancing genetic diversity.

Another significant development this summer was the Nisarg Anubhav initiative undertaken on Buddha Purnima, which witnessed the enthusiastic participation of wildlife enthusiasts alongside forest department personnel. The night on Machan revealed a diverse array of wildlife, including 55 tigers, 17 leopards, 86 wild dogs, 65 sloth bears, 1,458 spotted deer, 488 sambar deer, and 559 Indian gaurs across the core and buffer areas of TATR.

However, amidst these conservation efforts, the burgeoning pressures of tourism on tiger reserves have become increasingly evident. Instances of overcrowding and disregard for established guidelines pose a serious threat not only to the safety of animals but also to the livelihoods of local communities reliant on tourism.

It is imperative for tourists to adhere to the rules and regulations set forth by tiger reserves, respecting the sanctity of these habitats and prioritizing the well-being of resident wildlife. Recognizing that we are guests in their home, we must exercise restraint and responsibility to ensure a harmonious coexistence.

India's tiger reserves represent invaluable ecosystems teeming with diverse flora and fauna, yet the prevailing focus on "tiger tourism" often overlooks this rich tapestry of biodiversity. Strict adherence to conservation plans and guidelines outlined by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) is essential to safeguarding these habitats and the myriad species they harbour.

As we eagerly await the arrival of the monsoon, we anticipate its rejuvenating effect on the forests, particularly the bamboo, which has recently flowered, heralding the promise of regeneration and vitality for generations to come.

Dr. Jitendra Ramgaokar

Field Director, TATR
and Executive Director, TATR Conservation Foundation

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RESCUE OPERATION

In the delicate balance between human civilization and wildlife habitats, occasional encounters between humans and animals can lead to conflicts, posing challenges for both parties involved. One such instance unfolded recently, underscoring the need for understanding and cooperation in mitigating such conflicts.

Kothari village is adjacent to Kanhargaon Wildlife Sanctuary. Behind a cowshed on a farm, there was a well. When the farmer arrived at the farm that morning, he noticed a leopard in the well and immediately informed the Forest Department. The Rapid Response Team (RRT) quickly rushed to the spot, reporting to Adeshkumar Shendge, ACF, Central Chanda. In no time, we were all at the location, discussing possible options to rescue the leopard safely.

The leopard was a four or five-year-old female. We guessed that she had been chasing a dog early in the morning and fell into the well. She was visibly disturbed and stressed, and we realized the danger of her drowning if she became too tired to stay afloat. We looked for something to give her some solace and found a charpai nearby. We tied it to a rope and lowered it into the well. She quickly grabbed it and got onto it, giving herself some breathing space.

The bigger challenge was to get her out of the well without

injuring her or anyone else. One option was to put a cage into the well and pull it out once the leopard entered it. However, ACF Shendge ruled this out as it was time-consuming and there was no guarantee the leopard would get into the cage.

Instead, we tied a few eucalyptus wooden poles together and made a ladder long enough to reach the leopard inside the well. We also wrapped the rope around this ladder at regular intervals so that the leopard could grip it while climbing. As soon as we placed the ladder into the well, the leopard panicked and jumped into the water from the charpai. Understanding her distress, we distanced ourselves from the well. Within seconds, the leopard grabbed the ladder and climbed up smoothly. She glanced at us as she emerged and then ran towards the jungle.

We were all extremely happy that we could rescue her safely and see her return to her habitat. This act of compassion highlights the importance of coexistence and proactive measures to mitigate such conflicts. Let us remember this event as a call to foster harmony between humans and wildlife for a sustainable future.

- Noor Ali Sayyed
Wildlife Biologist, Central Chanda

WHAT MAKES A TIGER?

Every visitor to Tadoba wants a glimpse of the majestic tiger but have we ever stopped and wondered what exactly the tiger is? In this short piece, let's explore the origins of this regal species so the next time we see a tiger, we can appreciate the evolutionary history that has gone into making the tiger what it is!

The tiger (*Panthera tigris*) is the largest living cat species in the world belonging to the genus 'Panthera'. It is native to the Asian continent and is a close relative to other big cats including the lion (*Panthera leo*), the leopard (*Panthera pardus*), and the snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*), all resident to India. The tiger is currently classified as 'Endangered (EN)' by the IUCN Red List of Species.

As per the fossil record, the Panthera genus evolved approximately 2 to 3.8 million years ago. The tiger, as a species within the Panthera genus evolved approximately 1.6 to 1.8 million years ago. Human beings (*Homo sapiens*), on the other hand, evolved some 315,000 years ago suggesting that the tigers were around long before humans ever walked the Earth. The tiger was

originally described by scientist Carl Linnaeus in 1758.

Historically, tigers ranged from Eastern Turkey and Northern Afghanistan to Indochina and from Southeastern Siberia to Sumatra, Java, and Bali. Currently, tigers inhabit less than 7% of their historical distribution and have a scattered range that largely includes the Indian subcontinent, and some patches in China, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Russia, and Sumatra.

There are nine subspecies of tigers – Bengal, Malayan, Sumatran, Javan, Balinese, Amur (Siberian), Indo-Chinese, South Chinese, and Caspian tigers. Of these, the Caspian, Balinese, and Javan tigers are extinct. The South China tiger is extinct in the wild and survives only in captivity.

About 5,574 tigers remain in the wild globally. Of these, more than 3,500 tigers are thriving in India.



- Yashaswi Rao
Wildlife Biologist, TATR

A Stark Stork



The lesser adjutant stork may come across as slightly jarring at first glance. Especially if birds don't usually catch your eyes that fast. This one will though. A stern look in his wide eyes, hair was strewn around a bald yellowish head and the overall dark colours made him look almost like a villain from an animated kids' movie. But wait till you see it fly. Its wingspan covers the entire safari road as it glides so effortlessly and perches upon a tree far off. Even then you can tell just how big this magnificent bird is. Usually found near water bodies, they are simply a sight to behold, a display of power and unconventional beauty!

- Shreya Khadilkar
Visual Designer



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THE SUMMER SEASON

Anyone who has visited the central Indian forests in the summer would be aware of the high mercury levels. In Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR), the communities surrounding this vast expanse of wilderness engage in time-honoured traditions and navigate the complexities of living close to one of India's most renowned wildlife sanctuaries. This season brings both opportunities and challenges, painting a multifaceted picture of life around TATR.

Summer is a season of abundance for the collection of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), which have historically provided sustenance and economic benefits to the local communities. These resources include a variety of fruits, flowers, seeds, and other forest produce. The traditional practice of collecting NTFPs is not merely an economic activity but also a cultural one, deeply ingrained in the way of life for many villagers.

However, the flourishing wildlife population in the buffer zones of TATR has led to an increase in human-wildlife conflicts. Encounters with tigers, leopards, and other wildlife have become more frequent, often resulting in grave injuries or fatalities. Understanding the gravity of these conflicts, the government provides ex-gratia compensation to affected families, offering some relief in the face of these tragedies. Nevertheless, the presence of wildlife in these areas underscores the delicate balance between conservation efforts and community safety.

Simultaneously, summer heralds the peak season for tourism in TATR. The deciduous forests shed their foliage, making it easier for visitors to spot wildlife from a distance. The scarcity of water sources during this time concentrates animal activity around the few available watering holes, enhancing the chances of sightings for safari-goers.

This influx of tourists brings significant economic benefits to the local communities. More than 500 individuals are directly employed in eco-tourism related activities such as safari guides, gypsy drivers, gypsy owners, and entry gate managers. Beyond these roles, a broader economic ecosystem has developed around major tourism zones like Moharli. Entrepreneurs have seized opportunities in diverse

sectors, including renting photography gear and operating souvenir shops, adding further layers to the local economy.

Despite these benefits, the summer season also poses serious threats, the most significant of which is the risk of forest fires. The dry conditions and intense heat create a perfect environment for fires, which can devastate large swathes of forest land, endangering both wildlife and human settlements.

TATR has implemented a systematic mechanism to combat this threat, leveraging community support to monitor, detect, and prevent fire incidents. The camaraderie between the community and the administration is a cornerstone of this strategy. Local villagers, several hundred, trained and equipped to respond to fire emergencies, act as the first line of defence. Their vigilance and swift action have been instrumental in preventing fire outbreaks. Remarkably, over the past five years, there have been no fire incidents in the periphery of TATR, a stark contrast to the frequent fires in other parts of the Chandrapur district. This achievement is corroborated by data from NASA's fire detection systems, which use satellite technology to monitor fire occurrences globally.

The collaboration between the community and the TATR administration exemplifies a successful model of community-led wildlife conservation. This partnership has not only enhanced the protection of wildlife but also improved the livelihoods of local residents, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and mutual benefit.

In conclusion, the summer season around TATR is a time of transition, bringing both opportunities and challenges for the local communities. The collection of NTFPs, the boom in eco-tourism, and the ever-present threat of forest fires all shape the lives of those living in the vicinity of this remarkable reserve. The resilience and adaptability of these communities, combined with their cooperative efforts with the administration, make TATR a shining example of how human and wildlife interests can be harmoniously balanced.

- Saket Agasti
Social Scientist, TATR

A DREAM FRAME

Being a Photographer, imagine waiting for a particular dream frame for ten long years- the anticipation, accelerating choices, excitement involved, and countless moments of doubts and ample uncertainties. That's been my journey as a wildlife photographer. Each day, I ventured into the wild, hoping to capture something truly extraordinary, something that would not only mesmerize my audience but also fulfill a deep passion within me. Then, one day, it just happened. A moment so rare, so precious, that it took my breath away. A mother tigress, carrying her barely 15-day-old cub in her mouth, a sight so beautiful and tender that it brought tears to my eyes. In that moment, all the years of waiting, all the early mornings and late night calls and preparations, all the challenges and obstacles undergone, felt worth it.

The flood of emotions I felt, tears of joy included, is a testament to the depth of my connection to the natural world. Being part of an elite and selective list of photographers in India who have witnessed such a moment is both personally and mentally fulfilling. It marks a significant milestone in my wildlife photography journey, showcasing the rewards of patience and perseverance. I hope this achievement inspires others to pursue their passions with greater determination. Every challenge we face and every goal we set not only hone our skills but also deepen our appreciation for wildlife. Let's continue pushing our limits and cherish the beauty of this natural world.

- Praveen Premkumar Pai
Tourism Professional, Bangalore



A THRILLING ENCOUNTER

Watching a tiger in its natural habitat is indeed a blessing, but witnessing a tiger hunting live is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I was fortunate enough to be at the right place at the right time for such an incredible experience.

It was the summer of 2024. I was on a morning safari with my guests at Jamni Lake. We were observing Tigress T-7, popularly known as Choti Tara, as she rested on the opposite side of the lake. The scene was serene until a huge wild boar appeared, heading towards the water. Though it was far away, Choti Tara immediately noticed it and became alert.

With remarkable stealth, she slowly moved towards the lake and slipped into the water. We watched in awe as she swam across to our side, emerging silently from the water. Choti Tara then took a strategic position, lying in wait with perfect patience. As it came within range, Choti Tara sprang into action. She pounced on the boar, which let out a loud cry and tried to shake her off. However, the tigress had a firm grip on its back.



© Rohan Karikar

At one point, Choti Tara managed to grab the boar's throat. We thought it was over, but the boar was massive and fought back with all its might. Despite the struggle, Choti Tara never lost her grip. For almost twenty minutes, she held on tightly, ensuring the boar could not escape. Finally, the boar succumbed, and Choti Tara dragged her prey into the bushes.

The next day, we saw Choti Tara again. The marks of the previous day's battle were clearly visible on her body, a testament to the fierce struggle she had endured.

- Pravin Jambhule
Guide, Kolara Gate

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MACHAN MAGIC

It was late evening on 22nd May this year when my colleagues and I set out from Chandrapur to Tadoba. As we crossed the Padmapur gate, Roshan Katkar, a Field Assistant with WII, mentioned that it was raining ahead. Though I couldn't see any rain, the sudden drop in temperature made it evident. The once hot air turned cold and then came the lightning. The humid weather shifted to stormy winds, making the trees sway wildly in our headlights. It was both mesmerizing and scary. Suddenly, a tree on the right side crashed down. Roshan quickly swerved the vehicle to the left just in time, and we escaped unharmed. We thanked our stars and Roshan for his quick reflexes.

The rain soon followed, disrupting the electric supply in Moharli village. But our minds were on the next night—Buddh Purnima, a night cherished by wildlife lovers. We were worried the weather might spoil our Machan plans. Thankfully, the next morning dawned sunny with no rain forecast, so our plans were still on.

Every year, while the buffer Machans are open to wildlife enthusiasts, the core areas are reserved for Forest Department staff. This would be my third consecutive year spending a night on the Machan. In 2022, I had an amazing experience at Pandharpurani-2 with a tiger sighting. This year, Shahebaz Sheikh, our GIS expert, and I were assigned to the Kuwani waterhole in the Kolsa range. On our way there, we spotted a bold sub-adult leopard on Devada Road, giving us some great pictures and a thrilling start to our adventure.

The view from the Kuwani Machan was beautiful. The waterhole had dense bamboo thickets on one side and open space on the other, perfect for wildlife sightings. We were joined by Dyaneshwar Dhandare, a knowledgeable and passionate Forest Guard, thanks to Rundan Katkar, the Range Forest Officer of Kolsa, who ensures his guards spend at least four nights every month on the Machan or at protection huts.



By 5 pm, we settled in. Despite the previous night's rain, the weather was humid. As night fell, the waterhole became shrouded in darkness. We prayed for clear skies and no rain. The moon was yet to rise, and we listened to the sounds of birds, trying to identify them. Suddenly, Shahebaz heard a noise behind us. "Bhaloo!" he murmured. In the dim light, we saw a small sloth bear sniffing around, looking like a moving shadow. It came to the waterhole, drank, and disappeared into the darkness.

The sky was cloudy, reducing visibility. We had dinner and decided to take turns keeping watch. Dyaneshwar took the first shift and woke us within the first 15 minutes, pointing to a leopard near the road. It walked silently but didn't stop to drink water. During my shift, I heard a sambar's alarm call. I woke my companions, hoping for a tiger. We heard something walking on the right side of our Machan but saw nothing.

After that, though there were no major sightings, the night was alive with the sounds of nocturnal birds like nightjar and owls. A cuckoo called persistently, and crickets provided a rhythmic backdrop. With the first light of morning, the scene transformed. An Indian Pitta perched nearby, calling to its mate, followed by an Asian Paradise Flycatcher and a White-throated Kingfisher at the waterhole. The morning was a symphony of birds—Magpie robins, bulbuls, cuckoos, parakeets, peacocks, and sunbirds.

The highlight was a large sloth bear that came to drink at 7:30 am. It hesitated, then quenched its thirst before disappearing behind the bamboo as our pickup arrived. Elated, we descended from the Machan. On our way to pick up other staff from Pandhar Paani Machan, we saw the T-14 popularly known as Kuwani tigress, and her two sub-adult cubs—a perfect end to an unforgettable Machan experience.

- Anant Sonawane
Communications Officer, TATR

THE GAME OF LIFE

The jungle is a fascinating place, full of life, diversity, and mystery. It is also a place of struggle, competition, and survival. In many ways, the jungle is like a chessboard, where different creatures play different roles, according to their abilities and mannerisms.

The pawns would be the more diminutive creatures, such as the humble mongoose, wild dogs, jungle cats, and rabbits. While they can kill, they are often still the prey to many of the other pieces.

The snake would likely be the pawn that made it to the other end of the battlefield and became queen. This is because snakes can easily be killed by animals, such as the other pawns of the jungle, but the moment they reach full strength, they can take down everything on the board.

The rook would be the sloth bear. With its dense, heavy body, it can't move away from its path, or cut across the forest, just like the rook who can't cut across the board either and just moves in a linear path. While it doesn't have the pace or agility to sprint, jump, and weave, nature has counter-balanced it by giving the sloth bear its unique strengths, like the rook. The sloth bear can climb trees and has one of the sharpest, longest claws in the entire jungle. Similar to the rook, it can't skip around the board but can take down even the biggest of animals in the jungle, or the most significant pawns on the chessboard.

The bishop would likely be represented as the deer. The bishop is one of only two pieces that can cut across the whole board diagonally. Just like the deer, which also has the agility to effortlessly cut across the jungle, weaving around trees to get

to safety.

The horse would probably take the shape of a leopard. On the chessboard, the horse is an agile piece that can jump over other pieces and take a sharp turn before coming to a halt, just like a leopard. The leopard's greatest asset is its speed and agility, including its unique ability of effortless direction changes, for which leopards have the unique ability to use their tail as a rudder. Even while making a kill, both these

pieces can change their direction of motion effortlessly, and take down the piece they are targeting.

The Queen would surely be the tigers. The second-most powerful piece on the entire board. The piece that moves alone, but still can kill a colossal number of other pieces. It can single-handedly control the number of pieces on the board and get away quickly without getting killed due to its immense speed and stamina. All other pieces fear the Queen since if they cross its path, it can burst forward from a faraway position to striking in no time, just like a tiger.

And finally, the King. The all-powerful piece that controls the entire board without moving much. The moment the King is killed, the game ends. And in the jungle's case, the King would have to be the trees. They might seem insignificant. But there is no jungle without trees, and the moment the last tree is torn down, there is no jungle anymore. Only a barren wasteland, devoid of wildlife, devoid of beauty. It is up to us to ensure that never happens.

- Purv Ashar

Age 15 years

IBDP School, Mumbai



gencraft.com

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Are you a forest department staff, tourist, guide, driver, working with a resort, managing a home stay or a community member from TATR vicinity? Do you want to join our effort to spread awareness on forest and wildlife conservation through 'Tadoba Diaries'? Please share your interesting photographs (not less than 4 MB) and experiences (not more than 250 words) on tadobadiaries2021@gmail.com. Your photograph/experience must be related to TATR only. The best content will be published with due credit.



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BUNDLE OF JOY! Tigress T-7, popularly known as Choti Tara, recently welcomed her sixth litter with two adorable cubs. Watching these playful cubs and their loving mother at Pandharpauri is a truly a heart-warming sight!



SMALL PRATINCOLE

The Small Pratincole (*Glareola lactea*) is a charming little bird, about the size of a sparrow. Its greyish colour helps it blend in with sandy environments. You can find these birds along the banks of rivers and lakes all across India. In some places, they stay year-round, while in others, they migrate.

In Tadoba, you can spot Small Pratincoles at Irai Dam, Chandai Nalla Dam, Fulzari Village Lake, and Janala Lake.

These birds have wings that are pointed like those of a swallow, and they have a forked, flat tail. They are mostly pale grey with white underparts. In flight, they display a striking black-and-white pattern on their wings. They are quite small, measuring just 16.5–18.5 cm in length with a wingspan of 42–48 cm.

Small Pratincoles often gather in flocks and are very agile fliers, darting about like swallows or bats, especially at dusk. They prefer sandy or rocky islands in rivers but can also be found near marshes, estuaries and lakesides.

Their breeding season is from February to April. They make their nests in the sand of dried riverbeds, which look like shallow holes. The female usually lays two or three eggs, and both parents help raise the chicks.

Unlike most waders, Small Pratincoles catch insects in mid-air, similar to swallows, although they also hunt on the ground. They have short legs, long pointed wings, and a short bill perfect for aerial feeding. On the ground, they look mainly pale grey with brown heads. Their calls are high and rolling, sounding like "chirrit!" similar to the calls of terns.

- Rundan Katkar
Range Forest Officer, Kolsa, TATR



GOLDEN SHOWER

Often in the Tadoba forest, the sight of langurs munching on long fruit pods has fascinated me. An Adivasi friend mentioned that not just langurs, but also sloth bears relish these pods. They come from the *Cassia fistula* tree, better known as Bahawa or the Golden Shower due to its spectacular yellow flowers. It is believed that the purgative property of these pods makes a good laxative, helping langurs and sloth bears clear their constipated stomachs.

Bahawa trees are in their full glory as the temperature rises. In the hot months of April and May, you can see Bahawa trees laden with bright yellow flowers. These trees can even tolerate partial drought conditions. Their profuse flowering indicates a significant temperature difference between winter and the following summer.

A variety of insects, including butterflies and carpenter bees, act as pollinators for the Bahawa. Not just insects, but people are also extremely fascinated by these trees. While it is well known that Delhi and Kerala have officially made Bahawa their state flower, it is less commonly known that Keralites have taken their love for these flowers sky-high.

In Thailand, Bahawa is also the national tree and flower. In Laos and Cambodia, Bahawa holds royal significance. In Laos, the flowering plays a very important role during the New Year celebrations, when homes, doors, and windows are all decorated with Bahawa flowers for happiness and good luck. At Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka, Bahawa's strong and durable heartwood is used to build the 'Eleha Kanuwa'.

- Anirudh Chaoji
Senior Naturalist



A SHOWDOWN AT TELIYA LAKE

On a scorching May afternoon, the Tadoba jungle seemed to hold its breath, its usual cacophony subdued under the weight of the heat. Our round around Teliya Lake was routine, yet tinged with anticipation as we sought the tigress T-24, popularly known as Sonam and her cubs. However, fate had a surprise in store for us that day.

Amidst the tranquil waters of Teliya Lake lay a tigress T-163, popularly known as Collarwali, cooling herself, oblivious to the tension brewing in the jungle. This was Sonam's domain for more than a decade, and the sudden appearance of her rival raised alarms among both humans and the tigresses alike. Would Sonam tolerate this intrusion?

As we waited with bated breath, the jungle's silence was shattered by the distant alarm calls of spotted deer, signaling Sonam's approach. Sure enough, she emerged from the bush, a regal presence patrolling her territory. Collarwali, sensing her adversary, swiftly swam across the lake, poised for a surprise attack to claim the land as her own.

The tension mounted as the two tigresses faced off, their movements deliberate and strategic. Alarm calls echoed through the air, a chorus of warning from every creature in the vicinity. It was a sight to behold, each and every blow from both tigresses was massive, and both bled during the clash, but none was ready to give up. Capturing such a fierce fight in a single frame was rare and I was lucky to do it.

For the first time in my decade-long visits to Tadoba, I



©Deepankar Das

witnessed the primal spectacle of territorial dominance unfolding before my eyes. The battle raged on, each swipe and roar etching itself into my memory, representing the raw power and beauty of nature.

In the end, it was Sonam who emerged victorious, her supremacy unchallenged as Collarwali retreated from her domain. As the jungle settled back into its rhythm, I couldn't help but feel grateful for being witness to such a rare and unforgettable moment in the heart of the wild.

- Deepankar Das

Wildlife Photographer, Chennai

GOND TRIBES AND CROCODILES

In the heart of the lush, sprawling wetlands of the great Wainganga River, the Gond tribes have lived for centuries, their lives intertwined with the ebb and flow of the river's waters. The Gond people are known for their deep respect for nature, seeing themselves not as masters but as stewards of the land and its creatures. Among these creatures, none held a place of higher reverence than the crocodiles.

The story of the Gond and the crocodiles begins many generations ago, with a legend passed down through the ages. It is said that in ancient times, the Gond people suffered from a great drought. The river, once abundant and nurturing, turned into a series of dry, cracked beds. The tribe's crops failed, and the animals they hunted vanished. As desperation grew, the tribe's shaman, Bhimsen, sought guidance from the spirits of the river.

In a vision, Bhimsen was visited by Mogdal, the crocodile spirit, who was as old as the river itself. Mogdal promised to bring back the waters and prosperity if the Gond pledged to protect and respect the crocodiles. The crocodiles, Mogdal explained, were the guardians of the river, their presence a sign of the river's health and vitality. In return, Mogdal promised the Gond tribe that the crocodiles would never harm them.

Bhimsen returned to his people with Mogdal's message. The Gond tribe made a solemn vow to honour and protect the crocodiles, seeing them as sacred beings and symbols of the river's lifeblood. Almost miraculously, rains returned, the river swelled, and life flourished once more.

From that day forward, the Gond tribe's relationship with the crocodiles was one of mutual respect and understanding. The Gond people incorporated the crocodiles into their daily lives and rituals. It was common to see tribe people sharing the riverbanks with these formidable reptiles, treating them with a careful balance of awe and caution.

During fishing expeditions, the Gond would offer the first catch of the day to the crocodiles, a gesture of gratitude and respect. It was believed that the crocodiles, in turn, ensured bountiful catches and safe passage on the river. Young children were taught from an early age to recognize and respect the territories of the crocodiles, understand their behaviour, and learn the importance of living in harmony with them.

The crocodiles seemed to reciprocate this respect. There were many stories of crocodiles guiding lost fishermen back to shore or protecting children who wandered too close to the water's edge. These stories, whether myth or reality, reinforced the deep bond between the Gond and the crocodiles.

Offerings of fish, fruit, and crafted ornaments were cast into the river as tributes. A chosen shaman, often from the lineage of Bhimsen, would enter a trance, believed to commune directly with the spirit of Mogdal. This ritual was not only a plea for abundance but also a reaffirmation of the ancient pact



between the Gond and the crocodiles.

The harmonious relationship faced challenges over the centuries, particularly with the advent of outsiders and modern developments. Encroachments on the wetlands, pollution, and poaching threatened the delicate balance of the ecosystem. The Gond people, though resistant to change, found themselves having to adapt and defend their way of life.

They took on the role of environmental guardians, advocating for the protection of the river and its inhabitants. Partnering with conservation groups, the Gond used their traditional knowledge to aid in scientific studies and conservation efforts. Their unique relationship with the crocodiles provided invaluable insights into the behaviour and ecology of these ancient reptiles.

Despite these challenges, the Gond's bond with the crocodiles endured. The tribe continued to flourish, their culture enriched by the stories and traditions that had been passed down through generations. The crocodiles remained a symbol of resilience and the enduring spirit of the river, embodying the sacred trust between nature and humanity.

In the present day, the Gond tribes symbolize the power of coexistence. Their story is a reminder that respect and reverence for nature can lead to a harmonious and prosperous existence. The crocodiles of the Wainganga River, once mere predators, are now seen as sacred guardians.

And so, the legend of Mogdal lives on, woven into the fabric of the Gond people's lives, a timeless tale of mutual respect and the enduring bond between humankind and the natural world.

(Koitur = People from the Gond tribe/People who live on hills)

- Mandar Pingle
Deputy Director, Satpuda Foundation



BIRDMAN OF TADoba

Sumedhbodhi Gangaram Waghmare, now famous as the Birdman of Tadoba, has captured the nation's imagination with his extraordinary ability to imitate over 200 birds and animals. His journey from a humble farmer's son to a celebrated naturalist is the best example of talent, perseverance, and the transformative power of opportunity.

Born in the farming village of Kalgaon in Maharashtra's Hingoli district, Sumedh's early years were spent tending goats after school. His knack for mimicking the goats' calls to gather them back was the seed of a talent that would later blossom. Fascinated by the sounds of nature, young Sumedh began imitating the calls of various birds and animals, honing a skill that would eventually define his life.

After completing his 10th standard exams, Sumedh moved to Pune to pursue further studies. His perfect imitation of crows made him a local celebrity, often called upon for Dashakriya rituals. To support himself, he performed at a hotel for eight years, sold vegetables, and worked as a delivery boy. Despite these challenges, he completed his bachelor's and master's degrees in Geography.

Sumedh's life took a significant turn after marriage when he moved to Nagbhid in Chandrapur district, where his wife had an apprenticeship with the railways. Seeking employment, he approached the Brahmapuri division of the Forest Department. From there, his job application was sent to

TATR. He was called to appear for an examination for the gate manager's post which led to a fateful encounter with ACF Mahesh Khore. Impressed by Sumedh's unique skill, Khore introduced him to Dr. Jitendra Ramgaokar, the Field Director of the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR). Sumedh's performance wowed the senior officials, and he was appointed as a naturalist on the spot.

This appointment was a turning point. Sumedh was no longer a small-time entertainer; he had become a naturalist in one of India's most prestigious tiger reserves. His performances, held every evening at the Moharli safari gate since January 2023, blend entertainment with education, highlighting the importance of conservation. The outreach efforts of TATR through him extend to villages and schools on Tadoba's periphery, spreading awareness about wildlife conservation.

Sumedh's popularity has soared, with media coverage and social media acclaim bringing his remarkable story to a wider audience. Celebrities like Sachin Tendulkar, Nagraj Manjule, Sayaji Shinde, and Shivaji Satam have praised his work.

"Tadoba changed my life completely," Sumedh reflects. "My life is well-settled now. I get to do the work I love and, more importantly, contribute to the conservation of forests and wildlife."

Sumedh's story is one of resilience and transformation, a reminder that passion and talent, when given the right opportunity, can create ripples of change.

- Anant Sonawane
Communications Officer, TATR





BLACK & BEAUTIFUL! An extremely elusive black leopard is every wildlife photographer's dream capture. But it can't remain hidden from the camera traps. Here, a black leopard is seen captured on a camera trap.

THE ACHIEVERS (April-2024)

Join us in celebrating the amazing achievements of the top forest guards at TATR. These dedicated frontline heroes have done the most foot patrolling in their divisions.

We are excited to announce the top two performers for April 2024!



Forest Guard - A. H. Latpate
Beat - Sagaldeo
Round - Bhanuskhindi
Range - Tadoba
Division - Core TATR
Duration - 19 Days
Target - 125Km/Month
Actual Patrolling - 147.06 Km



Forest Guard - S. A. Mangam
Beat - Sitarampeth
Round - Moharli
Range - Moharli Buffer
Division - Buffer TATR
Duration - 30 Days
Target - 125Km/Month
Actual Patrolling - 235.56 Km

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Moharli

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Avinash Rathod
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**APNA
TIME
AAYEGA!**

In the majestic world of Tadoba's tigers, each feline has a unique tale to tell. While the forest department's numbering system aids in tracking these magnificent creatures, for wildlife enthusiasts, some of the affectionately named tigers leave an indelible mark on our hearts. One such remarkable tigress is T-7, popularly known as Choti Tara or CT.

CT, along with the illustrious T-12 Maya, once reigned supreme over the central Tadoba region. Maya held sway over the Tadoba Lake, basking in the limelight, while CT commanded the Jamni Lake and Gosekhanar Road. Despite Maya's dominant presence, CT's grace and strength never went unnoticed by those who knew where to look.

As her daughters matured, CT displayed remarkable wisdom. She ceded her territory to them and retreated to the buffers of Kolara, allowing Maya to continue her reign unchallenged. I thought this marked the end of CT's dynasty. However, I underestimated this resilient tigress.

Maya's mysterious disappearance created a power vacuum, and CT, with her characteristic patience, waited. Slowly but surely, she re-established herself in Maya's former territory. It was a heartening sight to witness CT strolling with undiminished pride along Pandherpauni Road. Though age has slowed her, requiring frequent rests, her eyes still gleam with the brightness of a warrior's spirit.

Now, at fourteen years of age, CT is the mother of two cubs, reaffirming her enduring legacy. Seeing her navigate her domain, unfazed by the gypsies and the clicking of cameras, is a powerful reminder of nature's resilience and the strength found in patience and perseverance.

CT's story teaches us a valuable lesson: patience and faith are essential. As the saying goes, "Apna time aayega" — our time will come. For Queen Tara, that time is now, as she continues to inspire us with her enduring spirit and the promise of her growing tribe. Long live Queen Tara, and may her legacy continue to thrive in the wild heart of Tadoba.

- Sanjay Deshpande
Wildlife Enthusiast,
Sanjeevani Developers, Pune



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