

This month-that age: Nov '86- Frustrated Tigress, Corbett NP

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On May 15, 1986, we observed that the buffalocalf tied in the sher bhoji the day before had been killed by the tigress and, as usual, dragged deep into a thicket of reeds. Although, for the tourists' benefit, elephants had been taken around her hide-out in the morning, the tigress did not come out into the open. On May 14, three tigers were sighted in the sher bhoji; they had probably taken fright at each other and abandoned the sher bhoji. Accompanied by the members of my unit, I set off on elephant-back for the sher bhoji at seven in the morning. In local parlance, a small forest block is known as a bhujiya or bhoji. This forest block takes its name, sher bhoji, from the fact that it is a permanent habitat of tigers.

A kilometer and a half long and four hundred metres wide, the sher bhoji is on the left bank of the Ramganga. On one of its flanks is a dense forest, through which water flows perennially. There are several thickets of fern and long climbers of maljhan entwine themselves like pythons around old trees. Even the sun's rays scarcely penetrate the thickly-forested sher bhoji. An ideal tiger habitat, providing shade and shelter from the oppressive summer heat. The tigress had often been seen wallowing in the muddy pools of this forest. Working our way through weeds and climbers, we finally reached the block to which the tigress had dragged her kill.

Clumps of reeds as tall as a full-grown elephant grew thick and fast in the entire block. Herds of wild elephants often came here to graze and, walking to and fro, had made make-shift paths through the clumps. These paths were like tunnels, paths through which a tiger could pass unnoticed, so much so that he could go from one end of the block to the other without ever leaving the tunnels.

Our team consisted of two cameramen Naresh and Rajesh and a trekker. Normally after a few years' service a mahawat learns a lot about the jungle, and can act as a trekker. As a rule I don't use a trekker; but, that day, I had to take one with me, since we wanted to drag the calf's carcass out of the thickets and study it minutely undisturbed.

Our elephant passed through the block three times, but we found no trace of the kill. On our fourth round, I happened to see a white mass that looked like a boulder, and directed the mahawat there. It was the carcass. The white mass was the stomach of the calf. The undigested food had decomposed and was rapidly producing gases which puffed up the stomach like a balloon. The head and part of the body of the calf was concealed in the clump. Reed bushes were bent over the carcass in such a manner that it appeared as if the tigress had deliberately and skilfully concealed the carcass. A detailed survey of the surrounding tract convinced

us that the tigress was not hiding in the sher bhoji. It was safe to carry the carcass. Before the carcass was lifted off the ground, I examined it closely and photographed it. The tigress had only eaten the flesh from his rump. The neck bones were badly dislocated and broken, and the neck had distinct marks deeply punctured by her long canine teeth. The tigress had dragged the calf about ninety metres from the spot where it had been tied, before eating it. I had the body of the calf brought back to that spot and had it once again tied to the same peg. I covered it with some grass and branches lest it attract vultures. Well before sunset, when we returned, a vulture was perched, on the body of the kill, devouring it; two mongooses and four tortoises were also feasting on it. They disappeared when they saw us approaching them. They had displaced some of the grass and branches from the kill. We removed all the dry leaves and grass from the kill, thus fully exposing it to the elements. The body had started decomposing and emitted a foul smell.

About forty five metres from the kill, a machan had been set up on a tall tree, where we could spend the night. We inserted freshly cut leafy branches in its flanked walls, to make it look like an ordinary tree, and removed every dry leaf from the machan. Very important. Because, in the dead of night, a dry leaf, if stepped upon, makes a distinct crackling noise, and defeats the entire exercise.

We sat there motionless, with legs crossed. Soon our legs became stiff and we longed to at least rearrange them, but we dared not, for the slightest sound would be instantly picked up by animal ears in the eerie stillness of a jungle night; even the calls of nature had to go unanswered. A cameraman on a machan must sit as motionless as a stone statue, with the stable mind of a yogi in meditation; and must neither sneeze nor yawn.

A tiger's eye is not capable of sighting a stationary object easily. Hence, our motionless state was its own protection. Nevertheless a lighted cigarette or the slightest movement could be a certain give away. Tormented by mosquitoes, we sat there helpless. Because we knew that if we waved our hands, the tiger for whom we were waiting in such a disciplined manner, on emerging for a moment, would slip back into the jungle at once.

A tiger and a leopard always follow the wind direction when stalking their shikar. It is believed that their whiskers help them feel the wind direction. Their whiskers though thick and stiff at the base, thin out towards the ends; they sway in the

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slightest breeze, the vibration are carried to their base, from where sensory nerves take them to the upper lips.

When dense jungle renders it impossible for a tiger to see a distant object, he is guided by sound. He can hear the faintest whispering and stifled coughs. Endowed with exceptionally acute eyesight and extremely sharp hearing, the tiger's sense of smell is, however, very feeble. Sit absolutely motionless on the machan, make not the slightest sound, remain wholly hidden behind leaves, and a tiger is unlikely to suspect your presence. Indeed, there are instances of tigers coming within five metres of machans without being aware of the presence of humans. God's wisdom is infinite; for if the tiger's sense of smell matched his hearing and sight, no animal could have lived safely in a jungle!

By seven in the evening, we had taken our respective positions on the machan. About twenty minutes later, the tigress gave a call from the southern end of the sher bhoji; it was repeated thirty-three times, punctuated by short pauses. The tigress was on heat and had come out in search of a mate. Two minutes later, her call elicited a response from a tiger who appeared to be hiding in the thickets to the north of the sher bhoji. His was also a persistent call repeated six times with pauses. The two animals were about eight hundred metres from each other, and we were halfway between them. They had slept through the day three kilometres from each other in two different shisham bhojis each unaware of the other's existence. The previous night the tigress had killed the calf, her hunger taking precedence over the mating instinct.

The tigress ignored the tiger's response. Eight long minutes passed. He again called her, thrice. Another five minutes elapsed before the tigress broke her silence. She was advancing slowly, but not in the direction of the tiger. Three minutes later, at seven thirty eight, the tiger called again, repeating the call intermittently seven times. The direction of his calls made it obvious that he was moving progressively from the north to the east.

Between the bhojis, there was a strip of land, seven metres wide, on which no high-growing grass was allowed to flourish; the strip of land where the calf had been tied. Our machan was at the western end of this strip, and gave us a view of the other end of this four hundred metre long strip. Very often, a tiger would emerge from here, cross the open strip and slowly approach a calf. This tiger, too, had taken the same route.

A minute later, the tigress called again. She repeated her deep call six times, pausing in between, though not in answer to the tiger's calls, which seemed to leave her unmoved. The tiger called once more from the other end of the strip and

then there was silence. The tiger's voice was low-pitched, the tigress's strident. Somewhere in the east, a peacock's loud, harsh scream broke the stillness. Perhaps a tiger had passed the tree he was perched on. He repeated his warning call five times, and then fell silent. At seven-forty, the tiger began to call his mate intermittently for two minutes. He crossed the strip, entered the right bhoji, and repeated his call nineteen times. He couldn't have been more than four hundred metres from the tigress.

Earlier in the evening, a herd of elephants had come to the sher bhoji to eat reeds. As darkness came, the elephants assembled under a tree behind and to the right of our machan to sleep the direction from which the tigress was approaching us. Soon the elephants smelt the tigress, and standing guard, trumpeted loudly. It was about seven forty five in the evening. Though a little startled, the tigress continued her slow prowling towards the machan calling nine times. At five minutes to eight, we heard an elephant cry, and then the sound of cracking branches. At eight the tigress called twenty times without pause. The failing light had put an end to my note taking. The tigress continued to call, albeit with long pauses. She was now just about a hundred metres to the right of the machan. She had called more than eighty three times, the tiger thirty eight times. She did not notice the dead calf and turned away from the machan, walking swiftly. I wondered how much farther she would have to wander for a meal and a mate.

Why, then, had she rejected the tiger who answered her calls? His low-pitched response to her voracious and sensual calls was, in a word, too feeble. She must have surmised that he was too old and weak to satisfy her full-blooded needs. The tiger had already left the sher bhoji, crushed no doubt by the tigress's disdain.

The tigress now proceeded towards Dhikala along the Ramganga and called loudly several times for a mate. At the rest house, she left the river bed and, climbing a hillock, proceeded along the Thandi Sadak. When she had walked about three kilometres, she chose a spot by the roadside, and lay in wait for a shikar. After a half hour vigil, she was about to succeed when a chital spoiled the show by 'belling' a warning and alerting all animals within earshot. Disappointed, she got up growled a couple of times and continued her prowling along the road.

A kilometer and a half later, she came to a small forest of sal trees on the right of the road, a permanent habitat of chital herds and boars. She lay down on the road at the edge of the forest awaiting the luckless animals, but tonight it was she who seemed to be singularly short of luck. No animal came, and it was now nearing midnight. She growled in bitter disappointment.

Meanwhile, we human beings were, if not disappointed, cramped and cold on the machan and had eased on our sweaters. The air was filled by the shrill notes of jungle insects; occasionally, the Ramganga valley would reverberate to a peacock's loud call; and we even heard a blue jay's shriek.

The disconsolate tigress resumed her stealthy prow along the road to the west of a grassland that was six and a half kilometres long and three kilometres wide. She moved noiselessly, her eyes ever alert, for almost thirteen kilometres. Her repeated mating calls put paid to her hunting. The unmistakable snarl alerted the chitals, sent them scurrying for safety. Since she was on heat, a mate was what she needed most; a day's hunger would be a small price to pay for the satisfaction of her overpowering desire.

She crossed the chaud, and entered another forest block in her beat, where several herds of hog deer lived. A sounder of boars too frequented its mudpools. Of late, the tigress had seen four boar-cubs grazing here with their parents. She reclined under a simbal tree and leaned against its trunk. It was past two, and dawn was none too far away. The night's vigil had brought us near the end of our tether.

Near the machan, mongooses and tortoises were wolfing down the calf. During the past few hours, many a family of these minor jungle scavengers had feasted on it. In the still of the night, the dry leaves on the ground continuously crackled as the animals walked over them. We hoped that if the tigress failed to get her shikar she would return to the kill before going home.

In a shisham bhoji, two sub-adult tuskers stood separated from their herd. The amorous attentions

of a cow elephant had led to bad blood between them, and they had fought intermittently through the night. In a jungle, the sounds of battle never fail to alert animals in the neighbourhood. The tigress silently watched the two tuskers, and also kept a greedy eye on a herd of hog deer grazing on the slope of a muddy pool, just five hundred metres from her. At that distance, it was not easy to stalk a shikar; she was waiting for them to come closer.

A sounder of wild boars was eating the ripe dwarf date fruits in the chaud, at a level higher than the tigress. They came towards the tigress in search of delicious fruits. One of them saw the tigress lying in wait and raised an alarm. Although the hog deer had not yet seen the tigress, one of them called, endorsing the boar's warning. The deer immediately bolted to safety. The tigress's cup of sorrow was now full to the brim. Frustrated, she got up and, roaring in disappointment, left that forest block.

Tortoises and mongooses were still devouring the flesh of the calf; and the din the elephants were creating, uprooting the trees in the sher-bhoji, deterred the tigress from coming to the calf. All round us the jungle was now waking to welcome the dawn. The sky over the hills across the Ramganga river paled perceptibly. The raucous sound of the insects had died down and the Ramganga valley was reverberating to the soft, musical notes of birds. The early morning breeze carried the heady smell of elephant secretions. In the sal forest, amorous stags were fighting, antlers locked, and chitals were calling for their mates. The tigress was in no mood to appreciate the beauty of valley, as darkness receded. Hunger and unconsummated passion had made her frustrated and tired. Defeated, she retired into a dark den to recuperate from the night restlessness.

First Announcement

From Royal Gifts to Biodiversity Conservation: the history and development of menageries, zoos and aquariums

The Spring meeting in 2011 will be "From Royal Gifts to Biodiversity Conservation: the history and development of menageries, zoos and aquariums". It is a joint meeting, the co-sponsors being SHNH, the North of England Zoological Society (NEZS), the Linnean Society of London, the Bartlett Society and The World Society of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA), to be held at Chester Zoo on Thursday and Friday 19-20 May 2011. All those interested in contributing are asked to contact the Meetings Secretary, [Gina Douglas, meetings@shnh.org.uk](mailto:meetings@shnh.org.uk)

