

The fascinating world of Sachin Rai

Our international trip started in the East African countries of Kenya and Tanzania. These countries generate a lot of revenue through tourism. And the land area that is protected is massive. For example, the protected area covering just Tsavo and Amboseli national park alone ranges around 25000 sq. km whereas even the largest national park in our country doesn't exceed 5,000 sq. km. The first animal we saw in the region was a large African elephant, which was dwarfed by the enormous acacia tree that it was standing beneath. Kenya even though a small country has a variety of habitats. Nakuru is a forested area whereas Masai mara and Serengeti are miles and miles of just grassland. In these regions, the wildebeests and the zebras are walking in a continuous loop throughout the year. They move in groups of hundreds, thousands, or even ten thousand. This is called the Great Migration. One fascinating fact about the migration of wildebeests is that there is no leader who leads the group. They walk in a straight line one behind the other but the one in the front is probably not even aware that there are so many others following him. In the entire stretch spanning about 18,000 sq. km, there are no rivers for about 15,000 sq. km. Only in the Mara region, which is north of the Serengeti, do they come across a river. And we saw their great migration at this point. When they reach the river, since there is no leader to guide them over the river, they keep moving back and forth on the riverbank, till one of them accidentally jumps or until someone unintentionally pushes someone else in. The heartbreaking part of this



Sachin Rai is an accomplished wildlife photographer who has won several prestigious awards and accolades for his work, including Sanctuary Asia Photographer of the Year and D J Memorial Award.

crossing is that not all of the animals make it to the other end of the bank because they are not accustomed to swimming. In a span of just 10 minutes, we saw at least 30-40 of them dropping dead right in the middle of the river. But on the other hand, there were a lot of vultures waiting nearby to feed on the carcass of these dead wildebeests. Toward the end of the day, we saw the silhouette of a mother and a calf rhinoceros in the golden hue of the setting sun. Interestingly, though there are two groups of rhinos in Africa, the black and the white rhinos, they are both grey in colour. One is a browser that eats only leaves and has a narrow-curved mouth adapted for this purpose while the other is a grazer that feeds on grasses and has a wide squarish mouth. For ease, the Danish people whose influence was more in Southern Africa during those times started calling the wide-mouth rhinoceros white rhinoceros and the other one black.

In Tanzania, we visited Ngorongoro park which is actually a caldera (a crater formed as a result of a volcanic eruption). So, we had to climb up to the rim of the volcano and then descend into the ginormous hollowed-out crater, which was home to a thriving population of animals ranging from antelopes to a wide variety of predators that feed on them. It resembles a true Garden of Eden.

Outside this is where the great migration ends. During the months of January to March, they reach this location, where they experience rain and this is where calving happens. Calving is the process where all the wildebeests plan their births during a span of 10 days and this is how they keep their populations intact. If the circumstances are not ideal, they can also postpone the birthing by 15-20 days.

It is breathtaking to see cheetahs sprint at breakneck speeds through the wild grasslands. They charge toward the entire herd of gazelles. And the gazelles being fast runners themselves, scatter at the sight of the cheetah darting at them. You blink your eye for a moment and you lose sight of the animal you are tracking because of the frenzied movement everywhere. So, it is either hit or miss for the cheetahs. Either way, it is an

absolutely stunning scene to watch. We also saw the lions in the Kopje landscape. Kopjes are formations of huge mountains of rocks and boulders. The landscape for The Lion King movie was inspired by these structures. The lions take shelter in these landscapes as there are no trees for shade elsewhere.

At Ethiopia, the roof of Africa we saw a lot of endemic species such as the Walia Ibex, black-breasted lapwing, the blue-winged goose, the nyala, and one of the stars of Ethiopia, the gelada baboons, the males of which have an hourglass-shaped marking on their front, then the Ethiopian wolf whose 99% diet is only rodents. These wolves are also called the gharials of the wolf world due to their long snout.

We then flew to the Madagascar Islands, the only land on earth where you can find lemurs. We saw an Indri peeking from behind a tree, which is the only lemur that behaves very much like the gibbons, in contrast to the other lemurs. Madagascar is also known for its chameleon and frog diversity. We came across the parson's chameleon which is about 1 and a half feet in length, the stump-tailed chameleon which is smaller than the little finger, the brown-leafed chameleon which is also not bigger than the size of a thumb and lots of bush frogs. We also saw a fossa, which is the sole predator on this island. It resembles a cartoon made by a school kid imitating a cross between a dog, a cat, and a mongoose. These creatures have a very eerie call and the male which wins over the other males in combat mates with the female on top of the tree for three days.

Borneo was the next destination on our itinerary. Even though the land appears green, the majority of the forests have been destroyed to make way for palm tree cultivation in that region. But whatever is left is still very pristine. We encountered the orangutans also known as the "man of the forest" by the local people due to their massive size. And they are incredibly

careful in plucking only the ripe figs and leaving the rest intact so they can come back and feed on them later when they become ripe. We saw the proboscis monkey. No reason has still been found for the enlarged size of the nose of these species apart from wooing a female. We also came across a massive female Malayan horned frog. Although the horn-like structures on top of its head are where the frog gets its name, this frog also croaks like a truck horn which was startling to hear in the

middle of the forest. Additionally, we encountered numerous other species like the white-crested hornbill, crested fireback, and cinnamon-horned frog. We also visited Pantanal in Brazil which has an amazing riverine system as it is a part of the Amazon rainforest. But much of the forest area has been converted to ranches leaving only about 10-500 m of forest stretch for wildlife. We came across a jaguar in the river, a giant otter, Ant

eatery, the curassow, and the beautiful agami heron. We also saw a massive sinkhole of about 60 ft depth and 50-60 m wide where the blue-green macaw birds breed on the inner walls of the well. Then we went to Costa Rica which is a stunning place for varieties of birds. We encountered keel-billed toucans, many species of hummingbirds, and poison dart frogs. Our final destination was the peninsular Kamchatka area, which is located in the far eastern part of Russia. To get there, we had to take the longest domestic flight, which was a 9-hour nonstop flight from Moscow. There is a cabin here that can accommodate 16 individuals. People travel here to see the Kamchatka brown bears. You cannot stay more than three nights at this place. It is next to the massive Kurile Lake. The salmon lay eggs in the streams where the river originates and they die after laying the eggs. The fry when they hatch swim downstream and take a break at this lake before heading towards the sea again. And when the time comes for them to breed again the salmon come to this lake and develop their eggs before swimming upstream and laying them. The bears wait here to catch and eat the salmon.

We visited all of these places, witnessed all these amazing landscapes, and encountered all these fascinating animals in just an hour through Sachin Rai's incredible photographs which became more surreal due to the added fabulous storytelling by Sachin. He is the modern-day robin hood who charges people for taking them on wildlife photography tours but gives away his photos for free when it is being used for conservation and research purposes.



Sachin worked as a web designer in an IT company for a long time before realising that wildlife photography was his true calling. He started photography with a film camera through which you could take only a limited number of shots and the reels had to be developed before you could see the pictures. So, you will have no idea how the picture has come until you see the developed version. He was intrigued by everything in wildlife and enjoyed watching anything from a small pratincole to a web-casting spider to a leaping frog. Taking pictures of all these helped him talk about his fascinating encounters with these creatures and share his passion for wildlife with everyone. He has been taking people on photography tours for over 14 years now. Over the years, these tours have not only helped him instigate people's interest in wildlife but it has also helped him draw their attention to the myriad challenges that these animals face. He looks for photos that could tell a story like the photograph of two tigers mating in a palace that had once served as a resting area for the king's hunting party. He also takes pictures that would help create an impact among people. He showed us a picture of a fox sitting in a ravine in Rajasthan. Then he explained how because people don't see the value of these habitats and simply view them as wastelands, this area has now been completely flattened.

He also gave us a brief lesson on photography techniques, including how to frame pictures and how to change the lighting. He talked about how anyone can shoot high-quality pictures with simply their mobile phone in the present age without the need for expensive equipment. He also discussed photography ethics. Our mere presence in the forest will cause disturbance to the inhabitants. He advised that before disturbing an animal, we should question its purpose. He photographs frogs for identification purposes, which has aided in research and the naming of a new species of frog. We should choose how much we disturb the animal based on the purpose of the photo. It is subjective to each person but generally speaking if you want to take a picture of an animal that has already been photographed numerous times, it is better to avoid distressing the animal by taking yet another photo and adding to the mountain of images that already exist.



We are in an era where we are witnessing the disappearance of so many incredible habitats along with their flora and fauna. Sachin does his part in conservation by taking pictures and sharing impactful stories with people. We should also endeavor to contribute our share in conservation in whichever way possible. Quoting Sachin, "Whatever we can enjoy, we should. Whatever we can protect, we should. And whatever we can conserve, we should."

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