

Searching for tigers in India

By Holmes Rolston
For the Coloradoan

A tiger! There! Black stripes moving slowly through the bushes.

I was seeing with my own eyes the largest, most charismatic cat on Earth — and the most endangered. Looking down a draw, 40 yards off, I watched the tigress creep forward. For a moment, I could see her head well. Then she disappeared behind a thick-leaved tree.

Gone.

No. She reappeared beyond, this time in enough of an opening that I could admire her muscles rippling, accentuated by the flowing black stripes framed against her yellow coat.

We had been at this spot a half-hour earlier, seen nothing and passed on. But we

hastily returned, hearing others had seen her. Two minutes later and we would have seen nothing.

I was in Ranthambore National Park in India, spending two weeks in search of tigers. We were on the prowl in an open-topped four-wheel-drive vehicle and had seen tracks, called pug marks and scat, and also heard the alarm calls langur monkeys give. They are the eyes and ears of the forest, and alert the cheetal, or spotted deer, who likewise call in alarm.

The tigress we are seeing is T-16, named Machli, the famous tigress queen that is 13 years old. Her name means fish, and there is a fish-shaped mark on her face. She is a good breeder, with four sets of cubs.

She is also especially muscular, a good hunter. Although

many tiger cubs starve, all her 11 have survived. She once killed a 14-foot crocodile.

Another tigress, T-24, in the next zone south has killed eight people. "She must be a man-eater," I protested. "In the states, we'd put down a grizzly that had killed like that."

I was told she wasn't a man-eater, because seven of the eight killed were not supposed to be in the forest. Last year, she killed the mother of a naturalist guide who was illegally cutting grass inside the park. The naturalist was a friend of my guide.

T-24 did kill a ranger earlier this year. She and her cubs had half-eaten the ranger before other rangers were able to rescue his body.

That evening, toward twilight, we heard an unusual



With more than an estimated 1,400 tigers, India is home to half of the world's population of tigers. However, the chances of seeing one in the open like this are rare. COURTESY OF THOMAS O'SHEA

bird call and stopped to look. We found no bird, but with outrageous good luck there was a leopard in the bush, only 15 yards away. It looked at us for 10 seconds, then faded into the bush.

What a day — a tiger and leopard.

The tiger is the largest cat. The biggest males are 110 pounds heavier and a head longer than the biggest lions. Females are smaller, and some tiger subspecies are smaller, so big lions can outsize some tigers. Records are confusing because, as big eaters, the weights of trophy tigers can include a full stomach — especially when hunters used prey for bait.

I saw my second tiger a week later at Kanha National Park. Late on the second day of searching and lingering where a tigress had been spotted in the morning, we heard the sound of leaves crackling but could see nothing.

Then, black stripes moving in the dark bush. We held our breath. This time the tiger obligingly and rather casually walked out onto the forest road in full view 35 yards away. The tigress looked at us, walked a little further down the road, paused at the other edge and



Holmes Rolston and guide Rajveer Singh are pictured. COURTESY OF HOLMES ROLSTON

disappeared.

A colleague, Tom O'Shea, a wildlife biologist from Glen Haven, was right beside me and managed to get a good photograph.

Still looking for her down the road 10 minutes later, a hen and a rooster darted from the roadside into the bush. This was the red jungle fowl, the wild ancestor of all domestic chickens. And there were other interesting birds.

India rich with wildlife

At Keoladeo Ghana National Park, a bird refuge, I saw dozens of bar-headed geese. These are the highest-

flying bird in the world, flying over the Himalaya Mountains to get here from Siberia.

Using a rickshaw to get about the refuge, I also saw the tallest flying bird in the world. The Sarus crane can reach a height of 7 feet. These cranes can live to be 80 years old.

A tiger, unlike lions, prefers to hunt solitary, stalking in forests. The black stripes and yellow tawny body provide surprisingly good camouflage in the wooded-bushy terrain it prefers. That makes them hard to spot. We stalked

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the tigers resolutely for days up and out at daybreak, back in the afternoon until dark and saw only two. I consider myself lucky.

I saw cheetal by the hundreds. The largest Indian deer is the sambar, which we also saw. Harder to see were barasinga, or swamp deer. I also saw nilgai, a large antelope. The males, blue bulls with dark blue-gray coats, are the size of and have a profile like a horse.

Half a dozen times we spotted gaur, a wild cow that is the largest cow in the world. Huge and dark colored, they are often called the Indian wild bison, though unrelated to American buffaloes. We also saw a hundred or more wild pigs, ancestors of the domestic pig, and a dozen jackals.

A tiger needs to kill one of these large deer, antelope or gaur about once a week. It succeeds in only one of 20 chases.

Future of the India tiger

Nobel laureate Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle Book" is set in Kanha country.

Half the remaining tigers in the world are in India. A re-

cent estimate is 1,410 in more than 43 reserves. Most reserves are small with a dozen or fewer tigers. There are about 55 in Ranthambore and about 65 in Kanha.

India launched a flagship program, Project Tiger in the 1970s, with powerful support from then-prime minister Indira Gandhi. That program has been praised as a success, although recent studies find management effectiveness ranges from very good to poor. The main threats today are loss of habitat and poaching for body parts, largely sold in China and Tibet.

Earlier, many tigers were shot for sport. The Maharaja of Nepal and his guests shot 433 tigers between 1933 and 1940. King George V and his party shot 39 tigers in 11 days in 1911-12. Noble royal hunters made some claims of protecting the people from tigers.

Jim Corbett, the famous hunter, once killed a tiger that had killed 436 people. He also noted that most of the man-eaters he killed were suffering from disease or old gunshot wounds.

Corbett became a celebrated conservationist. A main tiger reserve is named for him, as is a foundation to help the poor in India, especially those displaced by tigers.

The best estimates give the wild tiger only a 50-50 chance of surviving. My grandchildren might see tigers only in zoos. There are about 13,000 tigers in captivity, three or four times the number in the wild.

One positive sign is Indians enjoy their tigers. More Indians than internationals were riding around in four-wheel drives looking for tigers. The tiger has been revered in Indian mythology for at least 10,000 years, when the first cave images known were painted.

The goddess Durga rides a tiger. Its majesty is one of the reasons it was hunted nearly to extinction in the last century.

India has about four times the U.S. population in a land area one-third the size.

The world's most densely inhabited democracy with well more than 1 billion people is challenged to save the world's largest population of tigers.

I marveled at this awesome cat and was left hoping this superb embodiment of ferocity and power can remain wild and free.

Holmes Rolston is a Fort Collins resident and university distinguished professor emeritus of philosophy at Colorado State University who loves to travel.