



But so far I haven't seen a single Mahseer, big or small. My morale in about to hit rock bottom. Asaram can read the frustration on my face. "Sit still" he says "then the chances of a catch increases". "Are there any Mahseer at all, or is it just a hoax?", I snap back impatiently. Asaram seems unfazed by these accusations and maintains his genial smile. I sit as motionless as the rock behind which I'm perched. My body has begun to ache and just as I'm about to give up, there's a tug at the rod. Then the rod begins to jump in my hands, as if it will fly away any moment. I hold on with an iron grip. "Don't let him go" Asaram shouts. Yes, yes, yes! I've got him, finally. I begin to wind the string attached to the pulley

at the end of the rod and can't believe there's a 600 gram baby Mahseer in my hands. It dazzles like gold in the mid-day sun. Victory! I feel like I've conquered a fort. Albeit a small fort, because the biggest catch recorded weighed no less than 76 pounds. Light. Camera. Action. Grin. From

Sumantha Ghosh with his prize catch



PHOTO COURTESY Wild World India

ear to ear. Once again, please. I get clicked with the golden trophy in my hand. But is a slippery trophy which slithers and slides in my hands. In between the excited photo session, Asaram reminds me to keep dunking it in water from time to time. To keep it alive. Here in Vanghat, angling is a sport. And in keeping with that spirit, the Mahseer after being caught is released back into water. More significantly, it's a species on the brink of extinction. I learn that in the past the Mahseer was found in large numbers, all the way to Burma. Now they are rare, confined only to the Himalayas. When I learn this, it suddenly dawns on me that the thrill of releasing this precious fish back into the water is greater



An eagle perched on a tree



(Top) Spotted Deer, (Below) A walk in the wilderness



than catching it. In my hurry to set it free, I slip on a stone but manage to save my Mahseer. Then dip my hands in the river and loosen my grip. In a fraction of a second, she's gone. Back to where she belongs, her aquatic habitat.

The afternoon sun has reached its zenith. We are booked for a jungle safari. And we're running late. So we skip lunch and head straight for Corbett. I know seeing Him is like finding a needle in a haystack. Chances are at best slim, at worst non-existent. But the moment the Gypsy crosses Bijrani and enters the Park, I feel the exhilaration of being in His territory. We travel across a river, drive up slopes and bumpy mud tracks, spot deer, jungle fowl, black storks, wild elephants and sambhars. Still no trace of Him. He's illusive. Here, finally we've spotted a visible sign of His existence. Our guide, Hem Bahuguna points at a pug mark. The excitement is rising. We hear a sambhar's call. "Stay quiet" Hem instructs us. Does this mean He's around? Hem nods a 'yes'. We are waiting with baited breath, under a tree, for more than 45 minutes now. Waiting for the God of Corbett to appear. I'm both excited and scared. We are in an open Gypsy. What if 'God' in a moment of anger charges at us? What if He's planning an ambush of this vehicle that has trespassed into His terrain?

Another 20 minutes of waiting. No sign of Him. We have to report back to the Park's Gate. It's nearing closing time. Beyond six in the evening none is allowed in the Park. So we're heading back. "Better luck next time," I tell myself. Our Gypsy is inching back at the rate of 20 km per hour. As we reach an open space, I sense a movement on my left. "There He is," I almost yell in delight, when I spot the regal feline, a magnificent tiger. We have intercepted his path. He rushes to the nearby bush and waits for us to pass. Realising that we wouldn't leave without a full view of His Highness, he deigns to come out of his hiding place. He struts haughtily, looks into the camera lens twice. I see a condescension in his fiery eyes, as if saying "aa jaate hain kahan kahan se, jena mushkil kar diya hai hamara". Click. Click. Click. A full five-minute photo-op. Then He disappears into the undergrowth again. I am on cloud nine! My first sighting of the tiger, my first feel of holding a Mahseer in my hands. Not bad, at all. For an amateur wildlifer, it's a great start! I hope it is the beginning of a life-long affair with tigerland.



Hook, line and sinker. PARVAIZ SULTAN has fallen for Corbett. Photos by PREMNATH NAG

# tale of two tigers

Passion and patience are the two virtues required for angling. Especially if your target is to hook the Mahseer. This wondrous species of pisces lives in fresh water and can grow up to five feet or more in length. It shows more sport for its size than a salmon and therefore lays claim to the fame of being the best sport fish in the world. Believe me, they are supremely intelligent creatures. I am struggling for the last two hours, rolling up the flour dough in small balls and plastering them to the hook of my fishing rod. Hoping they're delicious enough to lure the great fish. Praying that the insipid dough will make up for the more tasty treats they are used to. Yes, the best bait is live fish, especially the *chilva*.

Unfortunately this piscine gastronomic delicacies are available only during the monsoons. So I've settled for the second best bet. Sorry, bait! But that does not seem to deter the

Mahseer. It's been over forty times now that they've managed to steal the food without getting their jaws pierced in the hook. Now I can feel my fishing rod gravitate towards water. "Got ya", I yell in excitement and pull out the rod only to find a bundle of decaying leaves emerge as my prize. The photographer tries to stifle a chuckle. But learns his lesson when he draws a blank himself, half an hour later. The metaphorical blank being an old gunny bag.

Asaram, our angling guide says that the Goonch, the silver and the black Mahseer are commonly sighted in the waters at the Corbett National Park. Lady Luck, it seems, is not on my side today. But the fishing rod is firm in my hand. Perseverance is the key. Plus the jungle orchestra keeps me company. The rustling leaves are in chorus with the gurgling of the Ramganga. The chirping of birds gradually is reaching a crescendo. Despite the occasional alarm call of the barking deer or the sounds of wild

elephants that interrupts, it is a perfect symphony.

Vanghat, on the fringes of the Corbett National Park is where we are now. It lies in total seclusion with the meandering Ramganga virtually cutting it off from human habitation. At the moment, I'm consoling myself with the thought that the journey to this place is a good enough reward. Well-worth the night-long bumpy car ride from Delhi to reach Ramnagar at six in the morning. Then from Ramnagar to Garjiya enroute to the banks of the Ganga's tributary (Ramganga). Here we boarded a Gypsy that raced along the course of the river. An adventurous drive by all means. Zigzagging across the river bed. We crossed the river four times. Sometimes the water rose to a height of three to four feet, touching the Gypsy's chassis, gushing in to drench us to our bones, spraying all over us from under the wheels. At other places, we drove over a shallow river, reduced to a narrow stream, its cry-



The log bridge across the Rungtunga that leads to Langtang

hot clear waters revealing large egg-shaped pebbles below. The roughly four km stretch of Jetties Road starts driving tight when you reach a suspension bridge made of log, strong logs. You cross the bridge to reach the picturesque cottages of the Wangtal River Lodge owned by the fisherman Lamsanta Chosh. This is where Anarun had joined us with the fishing equipments and most importantly, his time-tested knowledge of all fish that dwell in the Rungtunga. It is from him that I learn all about the Mahaseer. That it derives its name from its reputation of being the male star or the green tiger of the water. So named for its legendary combative skills, a tough creature for all angles. A more sophisticated knowing of its nomenclature can be attributed to the fish's big mouth, Mahaseer means big mouth.

A view of the Wangtal River lodge



Crossing the river on the Gupis

