

Big-game hunting in India

Philip Game searches for elusive tigers in the Corbett reserve

'TIGER is giving us dodge," declares wildlife guide Hem Bahuguna, calling a halt near some tell-tale pug marks (paw prints) and scrapings.

As the engine cools, then stills, we hear only the birds, the soft breeze and the distant chattering of monkeys.

Here in India, the most crowded of nations, there is perfect peace.

Corbett is India's first, perhaps finest, tiger reserve and is buffered by surrounding tracts of country.

You can spend days chasing tigers or cast a line to tempt the golden mahseer fish.

Tall stands of teak and the equally imposing sal cover the hillsides, and wide gravel riverbeds traverse expanses of waving grass.

Sambar, chital (spotted deer) and the solitary muntjac (barking deer) are all readily observed, especially when browsing in the grasslands.

Less visible, the wild boar, sloth bear and tiger all record their passing with paw prints and droppings.

Panthers, though endangered, continue to be sighted in the hill country — but, Bahuguna says gloomily, Indian authorities have recently confiscated quantities of contraband skins.

Bahuguna has set up a pre-dawn rendezvous at Amdanda Gate, outside the town of Ramnagar.

By noon we have jolted across innumerable gravel riverbeds, wound up into the dappled shade of sal forest and back down again, and climbed a watchtower on the edge of a broad river valley.

THE DEAL

→ **Getting there:** Corbett National Park is six hours' drive east of New Delhi. Overnight trains also serve Ramnagar. Flights to New Delhi start at about \$1000 plus taxes. Visit www.flightcentre.com.au

→ **Staying:** Ramnagar offers a range of accommodation including many hotels along the Ranikhet road. Vanghat River Lodge has rooms with board from \$US70 a night. Visit www.vanghat.com

→ **Touring:** Wildworld India runs tours of Corbett and other Indian reserves. Visit www.wildworldindia.com

We have examined the bark torn and chewed by elephants. But tigers remain elusive.

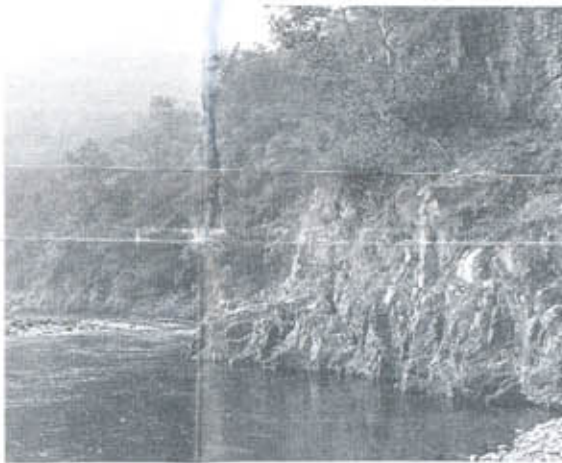
Park director Rajiv Bhartari explains that this is no cause for concern.

At Corbett, an estimated 143 tigers range across 1218sq km of rugged terrain. This population density is considerably lower — and therefore healthier — than at some of the better-known reserves in western India.

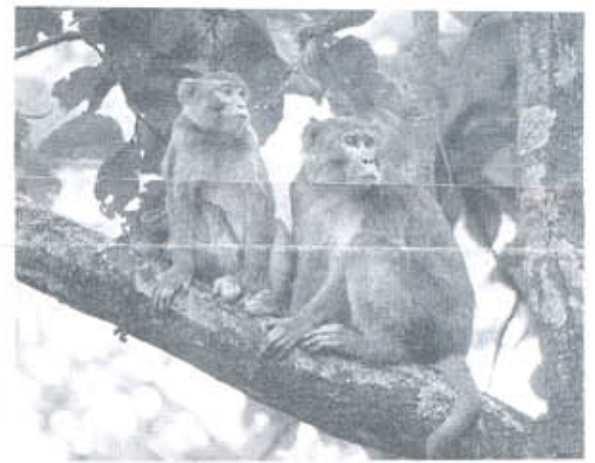
The park itself is named for Jim Corbett, author of the best-selling *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, who became a larger-than-life figure in the Himalayan hill country before World War II and Indian independence. The British hunter tracked down and killed 50 tigers and more than 250 leopards, which had terrorised local villagers, but believed that a taste for human flesh was developed only by ageing or wounded tigers. His concern for the tiger's survival led to the establishment of the reservation.



Deer oh deer: It's easy to find chital, or spotted deer, in the Corbett reserve, just not tigers.



Rugged: the Ramganga River flows into the reserve.



Wildlife: macaque monkeys watch from the trees.

In a last-ditch attempt to see a tiger, we step off the highway into the silent forest, following a foot track along a spur and down into the valley of the Ramganga.

Tiger scat is observed, but that is as close as I'll come to a face-to-face encounter with the king of the forests.

Instead I turn my attention to the "king of Indian sport fish", which draws anglers from around the world.

Yellowfin or golden mahseer

remain abundant here, but catches are released.

At a once-abandoned hamlet on the river flat, ecologist Sumantha Ghosh, in partnership with local communities and tour operator Wild World India, has established Vanghat River Lodge, just outside the reserve.

Vanghat trains and employs young villagers as housekeeping staff and gillies.

The hamlets and their garden beds are shielded by solar-powered

electric fencing, for protection from predatory leopards, browsing elephants — and an occasional tiger.

Barry Abbott, a retired Brit who has fished all over the world, declares himself well pleased with his first day's tally: a 7kg mahseer, with an 11kg giant slipping off the hook. My own catch is considerably less impressive, but the intangible rewards include a glimpse of two very large otters slithering across the river-worn pebbles.

Philip Game travelled as a guest of Indian tourism authorities and Wild World India.

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