

India

Hold that tiger . . . for another time

**Wildlife refuge is packed with animals
Glimpses of deer, elephant, wild boar**

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR**

CHILLA, INDIA — "Tiger paw prints. Very recent, very fresh," said Bhim, our watcher, as he crouched in the dirt beside the tire tracks of the jeep.

Our jeep had broken down and, while driver Sanjay had his head under the hood, Bhim was analyzing the tracks we'd been following for the past few hours. We were at Rajaji National Park, an 820 sq. km. wildlife refuge near the village of Chilla in the forested Shivalik range of the Himalayan foothills.

Located 240 km. north of Delhi, it's not the largest or best known of India's 90 national parks and 502 wildlife sanctuaries but its relative seclusion means it's packed with wildlife.

The park's gateway is the holy Hindu city of Haridwar where, pilgrims come to bathe in the Ganges River as it emerges from the mountains. Other visitors are westerners headed to ashrams and yoga retreats at Rishikesh, best known as the place the Beatles meditated with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968. I'd come for less exalted reasons.

After several days in the dusty desert of Rajasthan, I longed to breathe air that wasn't tinged with the smell of camels or dung fires. The possibility of seeing wild elephants, tigers

personation from behind a tree. "Don't worry, they'll find the mother," said my companion, local expert Parthi Krishnan. In addition to his role as general manager of Haveli Hari Ganga, a heritage hotel set on the Ganges, he was a budding wildlife photographer.

On a previous safari he'd witnessed a fight between a peacock and a wolf (the peacock won) and now wanted to capture more action. But he was quick to set my expectations.

"On a three-day safari, you can expect to see a tiger. On a two-day — a leopard. On a one-day, an elephant," he said.

"On a half-day?" I asked, thinking of my 6 p.m. train to Delhi. "Maybe a mongoose," shrugged Bhim from the front seat of the jeep. "But look, up ahead."

I jumped up to see a mother elephant the size of an ice-cream truck crossing the dirt road. Followed by her calf, they were moving quickly, unlike the ones I'd seen in the city.

"Asian elephants," said Bhim. "First vehicle of the day is lucky."

And we were. Soon, a troop of silver langur monkeys came crashing through the foliage. The largest, the size of a toddler, tried to stare us down and then

head. Deciding to stand upright to catch more of the action, I was rewarded by a glimpse of three wild boars snuffling in the scrub brush.

"Not advisable to exit vehicle," said Bhim. In order to dissuade visitors from picnicking roadside, the park had made official guides and jeeps mandatory.

Also part of the Government of India's overall conservation strategy, the park's emphasis has shifted from forest exploitation to rehabilitation. Several villages have even been relocated to reduce disruption to the wildlife.

At the edge of a dry riverbed, Bhim stopped to examine some tiger tracks. They were headed towards the park gate (and the baby chital, I thought). While Bhim radioed ahead to the office, Sanjay attempted to restart the engine.

It wouldn't turn over. We were stuck. As Sanjay and Bhim walked to the forest ranger's house a 1/2 km away, Parthi explained some of the park's history. Named after the famous freedom fighter C. Rajgopalachari, the park, created by the combination of three sanctuaries in 1983, now forms part of a valuable wildlife corridor that includes Corbett Tiger Reserve.

Most famous for its populations of tigers, elephants and leopards, it also hosts more than 315 species of birds and snakes such as python and king cobras.



KORI BRUIS PHOTO

Above, chital, or spotted deer,

India's national parks.

Left, Michele Peterson and Parthi Krishnan catch the wildlife action at India's Rajaji National Park, located near the village of Chilla in the foothills of the Himalayas.

chaan?" asked Parthi, referring to a nearby wooden observation tower once used by hunters. Surrounded by fresh tiger tracks and the sound of rustling bhabar tall grass, I decided to stay put.

With the jeep engine off, we could hear even more birds. A woodpecker hammered on a tree while several peacocks and their offspring fluttered nearby.

Soon, two wily, weather-beaten park workers arrived, pushed the engine and had us back bouncing past watering holes. Less than 15 minutes later, we arrived at the park gates.

Parthi was disappointed I hadn't seen a mongoose. But I wasn't. My camera was a veritable Noah's ark of animals.

And at the gate, there was even more good news. The mother chital and her baby had been reunited.

The tiger would need to wait for another opportunity. As would I, for my own tiger sighting.

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chita moved silently past. We were now climbing into the park's highlands, where sambar (India's largest species of deer) scrambled up rocky cliffs and green parakeets shrieked overhead.

Descending back down into the flood plain, our jeep navigated across dry riverbeds while blue kingfishers soared overhead.

If you go

- **Rajaji National Park:** Visit the official website at www.rajajinationalpark.org/index.html. Closed during the rainy season when the temperature soars to 45C, the park is open to visitors only from Nov. 15 to June 15.
- **India Tourism** offers information on accommodation, events and attractions. For details visit: www.incredibleindia.org
- **Built in 1918** on the banks of the Ganges River, the Haveli Hari Ganga in Haridwar is a luxury hotel offering guide services and ayurvedic spa



KORI BRUIS PHOTO

Buck is a Sambar deer, India's largest species of deer.

treatments. Prices for deluxe rooms (including breakfast) begin at 2800 rupees (\$75 Cdn).



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