WANDERER

# THE GEM OF THE VINDHYAS

## An unbeatable tiger sighting awaited an intrepid wildlife photographer in Panna National Park & Tiger Reserve


P-142 with one of her cubs

Almost two decades ago, I began my pilgrimage to the Indian wilderness with a visit to the gem of the Madhya Pradesh forests — Kanha National Park. For a novice to the jungle, it was almost love at first sight. I was utterly charmed by its untamed, verdant wilderness and mesmerised by my first sighting of a magnificent tigress in the wild. That unforgettable experience seemed to open before my eyes an entirely new vista of nature.

Yet, for one reason or other, another jewel among the great forests of the state, Panna National Park & Tiger Reserve, remained unexplored. This time, therefore, I had no hesitation in accepting an invitation to join a group of wildlife photographers planning a visit to Panna in the month of May.

### A CATASTROPHE AND THE RESURGENCE

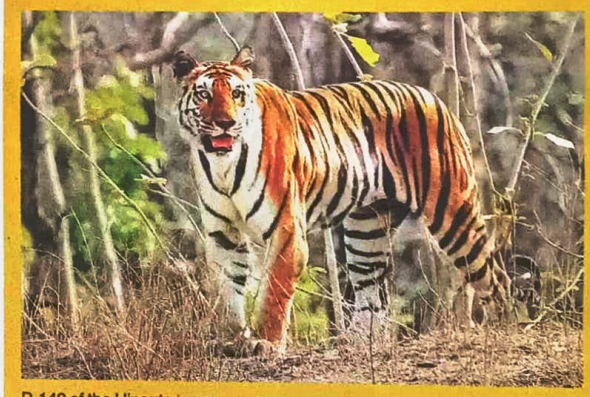
A devastating catastrophe struck Panna Tiger Reserve in February 2009, rendering it completely devoid of tigers. A chronic malady of rampant, organised poaching had gradually taken hold of the reserve, involving groups of poachers and some ritualistic hunters belonging to the local Pardhi tribals, whose traditional practices included hunting of wild animals.

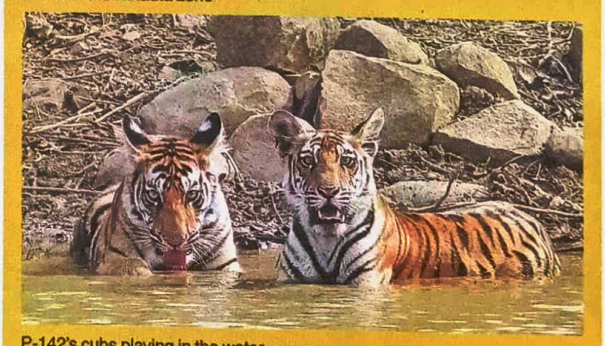
Realising the gravity of the situation, the Panna Forest Department swung into action and launched one of India's most remarkable tiger reintroduction programs. Two tigresses, one each from Bandhavgarh and Kanha, and one male tiger from Pench were translocated to Panna in November 2009. Then, T2, the tigress brought from Kanha, delivered four cubs in her first litter in October 2010. The reintroduction is now widely regarded as an important conservation success and a model of active tiger recovery.

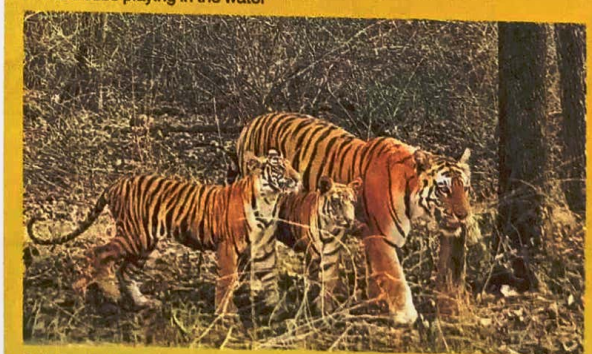
### JOURNEY THROUGH EMERALD ACRES

Panna Tiger Reserve consists of two core zones — Madla and Hinauta — while Akola and Jhinna constitute its buffer. Of the two core zones, Madla is the more popular one and also the principal entry gate. Hinauta, being the upper tier, offers the beauty of a genuine table-top plateau landscape and is a rich repository of the reserve's fauna.

On reaching Panna, we learnt from our Gypsy driver, Hira, that both core zones were regularly yielding sightings of two tigresses — P-141 of Madla and P-142 of Hinauta. What immediately heightened our excitement was the news that both tigresses were then rearing newly-born cubs and were often seen moving through the forest with them.


P-142 of the Hinauta zone


P-142's cubs playing in the water


P-142 with her cubs

We began our exploration with the Hinauta Zone because, only the previous day, P-142 had been sighted with her three cubs that were about three months old.

As our Gypsy entered through the Hinauta gate and the landscape gradually unfolded before us, I was awestruck by the spectacle of the vast, almost endless table-top plateau. Its oxblood-red soil was covered with dry, short grass, creating a landscape unlike anything I had previously seen in a forest. It was truly mesmerising.

Soon, Hira drew our attention to a fresh tiger pugmark pressed into the dusty track—possibly that of P-142. The news immediately rekindled our excitement. Our Gypsy spent hours traversing the meandering forest tracks in search of the tigress, but P-142 remained elusive. Meanwhile, the merciless May sun began taking its toll. We descended from the Hinauta highland through the steep escarpment separating the plateaus and reached Rajbagh. There we decided to pause beneath a deep shade of a dense congregation of Palash trees, partly to escape the searing midday heat and partly to replenish ourselves for the next phase of our journey.

The moment our Gypsy's engine was switched off, a deafening silence of the forest engulfed us. Soon afterwards, looking far and wide I noticed some ungulates moving through the tall grasses. As we approached, our guide murmured, "Sir, *ye* chinkara *hai*." I was instantly elated. In more than a decade of travelling through India's national parks and sanctuaries, I had never been fortunate enough to see the much-talked-about chinkara, the beautiful Indian gazelle.

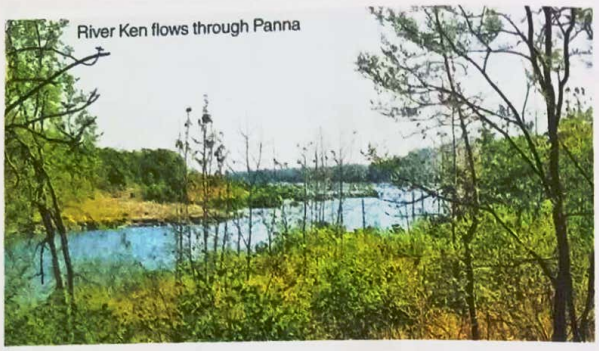
Sensing our presence, the extremely shy animal attempted to disappear into the grass. But before doing so, it turned back towards us and remained still for a few precious moments. That brief pause gave me the opportunity to admire and photograph the delicate creature — from its finely shaped face and dark expressive wide eyes with long eyelashes, to its long pointed ears, sleek slender body and lustrous sandy-buff coat.It had generously granted me far more time than a Chinkara normally allows a photographer and It had made my day.

### AND ENCOUNTERING THE SUPREME

After many years of jungle-hopping, I have repeatedly experienced how the thrill, excitement and sense of fulfilment during a wildlife trip, seem to rise towards some unforeseen climax. Yet no one can ever predict where exactly that sweet point will lie.

We had no idea what was in store for us when we began our penultimate morning safari from the Madla gate. After taking a sharp right turn, our Gypsy followed the long, relatively straight and bumpy road along the Ken River. The river, winding through the Vindhyan

CONTD ON P14



River Ken flows through Panna

FROM P12

landscape amid rocky outcrops, offered a fabulous panorama.

After crossing the track and taking a left turn, we entered a narrow stretch of road. Suddenly, intermittent alarm calls of *chital*, accompanied by the guttural barks of langurs, were followed by the sawing roar of a leopard somewhere inside the forest. Our guide whispered, "*Ye kabhi bhi bahar aa sakti hai*, road cross *karne ke liye*." We were instantly on our toes. Hira parked the Gypsy at the edge of the steep slope and waited patiently. But, as luck would have it, the alarm calls gradually faded into silence, suggesting that the leopard had probably moved away. With considerable disappointment at missing what might have been a golden opportunity, we resumed our journey towards Hinauta.

The wide brick-red landscape contrasted beautifully with pale golden grass and green patches of teak and mixed deciduous forest. Under the early morning light, every turn of the winding track revealed a fresh landscape, resembling a canvas painted in burnt sienna, gold and green.

Our eyes constantly scanned the shadows beneath the teak foliage for that magical combination of orange and black—the sight of which never loses its power to excite. Then, rounding a bend, we encountered a pair of ungulates I had never seen before. Our guide pointed towards them and whispered, "Sir, *ye dono chousingha* female *hai. Aap log bahut* lucky *ho, ye bahut kam dikhti hai*." I raised my camera and saw, only a few yards away, two slender, light-built antelopes standing perfectly still and watching us with dark eyes fringed by long lashes. Their warm golden-fawn coats glistened softly in the morning sunlight, while their throats, chests, bellies and the inner sides of their legs were creamy white. Their extreme shyness, delicate build and quiet elegance made them appear almost unreal to me.

I turned ecstatic having seen such an elusive creature right on the open standing in front of my eyes and that too for the first time in my life. Wildlife safari, like cricket, has an unwritten rule: you never know how productive it would be until the vehicle finally leaves the forest gate.

While we were still savouring the sighting of the *chausingha*, Hira's mobile phone began to buzz. Keeping the Gypsy moving, he answered the call and spoke briefly in his local dialect. Sitting diagonally behind him, I watched the solemn expression on his face gradually transform into one of unmistakable excitement. He disconnected the phone and turned to us to say in a whisper, "P-142 female *ki* sighting *shayad hone wali hai* Ghatera Taaw *main*!" He immediately sped towards the spot.

A few minutes later, we reached the elevated bank of a large pond, partly filled with muddy water. Around it, a long queue of tourist Gypsies had already gathered, all waiting for the grand arrival of the Queen of Hinauta — P-142 — and her three cubs. We too joined the queue, found a suitable position and settled down to wait.



Chinkara, the Indian gazelle

The forest lay wrapped in the heat of the approaching May noon. We sat quietly, our eyes constantly moving across the pond, while an unmistakable tension built within us. Then, suddenly, the forest erupted with shrill alarm calls of peacocks, *chital*s and *langur*s rose almost simultaneously, spreading an uproar across the entire area. I instinctively raised my camera, sensing that the long-awaited drama was about to unfold.

Within minutes, two of the three cubs appeared on the mound on the opposite side. They walked straight into the pond and sat down in the murky water, soaking themselves. The third followed stealthily and settled a few yards away. The alarm calls continued. Then, from behind the elevated bank of the pond, a strong yet graceful tigress emerged into view, and a wave of joy swept through the waiting tourists. Our guide whispered: "Sir, *yehi hai woh mada* P-142."

The regal tigress stood for a few fleeting moments, surveying the whole surroundings. Her powerful shoulders rose beneath a rich golden-ochre coat, while deep black stripes ran across her body like bold brushstrokes on a living yellow canvas. Then she moved briskly towards the water. As she approached the pond, her otherwise inscrutable amber eyes seemed to soften when she looked towards her three cubs soaking in the water. She squatted at the edge and began drinking deeply from the muddy water while the cubs remained submerged nearby.

The three little bundles of curiosity and raw energy soon began their own entertainment — jostling one another, splashing water and playfully wrestling in the shallows. Yet even while drinking, the amber eyes P-142 never veered from keeping a close watch on her cubs. Her ears remained pricked, flicking at the faintest sound. Every now and then she raised her huge head to survey the surroundings with intense maternal alertness. Watching this scene from the opposite bank was, for me, a moment of almost celestial bliss. Here was a formidable apex predator, feared and revered as the supreme hunter of the forest, displaying alongside her three frolicking cubs the tenderness and vigilance of motherhood.

The entire spectacle lasted barely 10 minutes. But those 10 magical minutes would remain etched in my memory forever.

When P-142 finally quenched her thirst and turned back towards the forest, all three cubs withdrew from the murky water of the pond and followed her. Then began another delightful episode. The cubs gambolled around their mother, teasing her at every now and then — butting at her tail, nuzzling into her belly, knocking against her hind legs with their paws and pressing their bodies against her muscular forelegs. P-142 patiently endured their playful assaults, occasionally responding with a gentle nuzzle or an indulgent lick.

It was something far more precious: an intimate glimpse into the private world of a tigress and her young. Then, as silently as they had appeared, the family disappeared into the tall grassland of Hinauta.

***—Amitava Banerjee***

Pictures by the writer



Tigress P-141 cooling off in a nallah in Pipertola



P-141's male sub-adult cub



The female *chausingha* duo



Water bodies like this pond are a major attraction for tigers on hot days