

Pages from the diary of Tejas – Orange County, Kabini, June 2010

Tejas visits our resorts in Coorg and Kabini and shares with you some of his uplifting experiences. Join him as he immerses himself in the activities at our two resorts, and enjoy them with him, virtually!

Tejas Joseph resides in Auroville near Pondicherry and is part of a consulting group engaged in creating viable models of decentralised lighting (using solar energy) for off-grid Indian villages. Tejas travels a lot in the course of his work and feels a deep connection with the history and ethos of the places he visits. He is a keen observer of the winds of change that are now blowing across the physical, cultural and social landscapes of India and seeks to capture its effects in his articles, ever believing that the journey is as important as the destination, the travel as rewarding as the arrival! Feel free to write to him at pjtejas@gmail.com if your interests or work coincide with his.



Activity Name	Boat Safari
Duration	3 Hours
Timing	6.30 AM to 09.30 AM & 03.30 PM to 06.30 PM
Guided	Yes
Prior Booking Required	Yes
Cost	Indian Nationals - Rs. 1000/- & Foreign Nationals - Rs. 2000/- per person per safari.

Watching Wildlife from a Boat

There is palpable excitement at the lounge in the late afternoon where a group of 15 of us assemble for a short briefing (about the Nagarhole sanctuary, the Kabini basin and the flora and fauna they sustained) before setting off on a boat safari up the Kabini.

Going on a wildlife safari is a lot like buying a lottery. You may not always get the prize you wish for (like a tiger or otter sighting), but unlike a lottery, you will always get something good out of every safari. And they are not consolation prizes. They are rewards in themselves. They remind us that the edifice of nature consists of many bricks. Whether large or small, tiny or mighty, simple or complex, they all have their hallowed place





in the web of life, none being more important than any other. Understanding this is the key to appreciating wildlife in all its forms, for these are nothing but the different faces of nature in the end.

The first 'sighting' we make before boarding is a huge Dung Beetle that was slowly finding its way down the path to the jetty where our boat lay tethered. It was symbolic of the extensive fauna of this area, and a cue to us to 'not lose sight of the forest for the trees!'

We head upstream in a westerly direction. The boat kept gently bobbing on the wavy waters of the Kabini, (*actually a reservoir as the Kabini River, further downstream, was dammed in 1974*). The river had swelled on account of the monsoon and the strong winds from the mountains to the west caused it to be a little rough this afternoon. Chill, wet spray from the wake of the boat showered us from time to time. It soon strikes one that the journey can be as wonderful as the destination. Being on a boat is an experience unlike any other. Looking out to land from water is the reverse of our normal everyday experience. It broadens our reference points and, having no obstructions like buildings or trees, brings in more

to our field of vision. The senses are unusually alert, not being swamped and dulled by the din of the city or those of human activity. One can drink in the beauty of the Kabini waterscape as the late afternoon sun mirrors off its surface in dancing ripples and spots. Dead trees and stumps stand out of the river at different points, adding a surrealistic touch to the scene. The sky above us is filled with big wooly tufts of clouds with a hint of dark monsoon grey. What amazing photographs this will make for!

The air around us is now filled with the shrieks and calls of different birds. Narendran, our guide on the safari, tells us that the Kabini (at this part where it borders the Bandipur and Nagarhole sanctuaries) is a bird lover's haven. On any given day, one can see the three common species of egrets found in Kabini. These include the Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*), Great Egret (*Casmerodius albus*) and the Intermediate Egret (*Mesophoyx intermedia*). One can also see Herons, including the Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*), Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) and the ubiquitous Cormorants. These include the Indian Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*), Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) and the Little Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*). Our eyes drifted landwards (on the Bandipur side) and we saw some Elephants; first an adult with a male calf and then two young tuskers locked in playful combat.



A little further away, we saw a larger herd of about 13 elephants stroll out of the thick bamboo groves at the edge of the Bandipur Park. Spotted Deer (*Axis axis*) and Sambar Deer (*Rusa unicolor*) dotted the river banks on both the Bandipur and Nagarhole sides in large numbers feeding on the young grass just sprouted after the first rains of the season. We watched in fascination the awesome aerobatics (that would be the envy of any human paraglider) of the Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*) as it floated, dived and swept past us in small

circles looking for food in the river. Narendran pointed out a rather unusual bird sitting on the leafless branch of a dead tree in the river.

The Snakebird, also known as the Darter (*Anhinga melanogaster*), gets its name because of the way it holds its head on its long neck, like that of the raised hood of a striking snake! Even as we watched, it spread its wings and flew off, displaying very attractive plumage. Turning our eyes landward again (it looked as if all three elements – water, air



and earth – took turns to display their secrets to us), we saw a fairly large Wild Pig (*Sus scrofa*) rooting quietly in the grass unmindful of either the deer or the elephants around it. Soon this motley group was joined by a lively band of monkeys – the Bonnet Macaque (*Macaca radiata*). On the opposite (Nagarhole) side, we spotted (through binoculars) an adult Stripe-necked Mongoose (*Herpestes vitticollis*) scrambling back up from the water's edge. He is considered to be the largest of his kind, and keeps a rather low profile. This was a rather rare sighting, according to our guide. Today was

turning out to be a good day after all for us wildlife gazers!

Our boat driver, Sivaraj, (whose vision sans binoculars is phenomenal), cut the engine and pointed out to what seemed like logs from the distance. We came upon five large Marsh Crocodiles (*Crocodylus palustris*), three of which were on the shore (looking rested after a meal presumably), while two others were in the water partly submerged but identifiable by their long snouts visible above the waterline. We approached closer, feeling a sense of mild dread and awe at these perfectly still forms.

Crocodiles are amongst the oldest evolutionary survivors who once shared terrain and competed for food with dinosaurs. They have not changed much from that time. However, unlike other reptiles, they have an efficient four-chambered heart (like birds and mammals) that probably accounts for their relatively long life spans. It is also believed that their long life (unless hunted) is also due to their life styles and low metabolic rhythms, which conserve vital energy, probably extending this into a long life. Is there a lesson here for us activity and exercise obsessed humans?



From contemplating the crocodile, one of nature's oldest products, our feelings give way to euphoria at the symmetry, ease and control of an Osprey's (*Pandion haliaetus*) flight as it winged its way eastwards across from us.

Back on the water, Narendran points to the Lesser Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna javanica*), a resident bird.

We subsequently reached the western tip of the reservoir and the boat swung around in an arc to head back to the resort. On the way back, we stopped for a while at “Mastigudi”, a sacred site where a temple once stood, before the rising waters of the dam and reservoir submerged it. This temple has an old history and is believed to have been built by the tribes who once lived in these forests long before it became a protected sanctuary. The presiding deity here is our very own elephant god, Ganesh, and Mastiamma, a forest goddess revered by the natives. They stand in mute witness to a happier time when man seemingly knew his place in the ecosystem, mindful of its fragility and respectful of its needs.

We cast one last look upon the Bandipur shore before we turned the last bend in the river. The animals we had seen were all there, only joined by more of their groups. As we watched, a lone Gaur, also called the Indian Bison (*Bos gaurus*), wandered in from the forest and began to nibble upon the grass - looking majestic and standing out (if a bit lost) in the presence of numerous deer, elephants and monkeys.



The Kabini is a magical mistress. She can reward you with breathtaking wildlife sightings, if this is all that you seek. However, she can open a third eye in you if you are ready to be awakened to the mysteries and marvels of the natural world and the infinite maze of life it conceals and nurtures.