

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	Vehicle Safari
Duration	4 Hours
Timing	05.30 AM to 09.30 AM & 03.00 PM to 07.00 PM
Guided	Yes
Prior Booking Required	Yes
Cost	Indian Nationals - Rs. 1000/- & Foreign Nationals - Rs. 2000/- per person per safari.

Safari on 4 wheels

A wildlife safari is not quite complete until you have taken one by land (a proper jungle safari!) as well. Though they are two sides of the same coin, they have their own peculiarities and character as evinced in their flora and fauna.

We set off early (6 am!) the second morning to the Rajiv Gandhi national wildlife park that lay about 3 km from the resort. The first leg of it had to be done by boat to get across the Kabini to its northern side where our 16 seater safari vehicle waited.

It was cool and clear but we saw dark rain clouds in the distance over the Wynad hills of Kerala to the west and silently prayed that they would not catch up with us, at least not until our safari was done!

We drove through a couple of villages and the numerous small farms that surrounded





them upon which grew simple grains, vegetables and fruits. These villages evolved from simple settlements started by those who were given land by the Government in compensation for what they had lost through subsidence when the Kabini was dammed in the mid seventies. These settlements were almost at the doorstep of the national park.

They were part of the Nagarhole forest at one time. The hand of man

was clearly visible in the cultivated landscape of the villages. Extensive plowing was causing erosion of the land and silting up the reservoir. The cattle of the villagers foraged upon the grass that grew on the banks of the reservoir, cutting the food chain of the wild animals that also depended upon it, particularly the deer and elephants. Many farms were girded with electrified fences to keep off deer, boar and elephant. It was obvious that man and beast were locked in competition; one trying to keep, and the other trying to take!

While we may be tempted into thinking that this was inevitable and no more than a simple problem of supply and demand gone wrong, there is a bigger issue here with rather grave underpinnings. Increasing human intrusions and natural disasters are causing forested areas to thin each year. This takes away the food security of many animals causing them to move closer to human settlements, triggering an expected conflict of interests and survival.

An idea that is being thought up to partially contain this growing problem is the corridor concept*. The involve linking fragmented forests so that animals can move freely.

** Conceived by forest authorities and concerned conservationists, it was originally aimed at elephants, though it has the potential to include other animals as well. Essentially a benign corridor is a planned intervention. It is assumed that this stratagem would benefit both man and animal. However, for such an idea to be successful, it will have to have the enlightened and voluntary participation of many forest officials, wildlife enthusiasts and environmentalists along with homesteaders, entrepreneurs and plantation owners who are located close to forests and wildlife; undoubtedly a daunting task of no small magnitude! But failure to address the problem in one way or another could lead to the sad decimation of many vulnerable animal species.*

Designated a wildlife sanctuary in 1974, Nagarhole occupies an area of 644 sq km. It is home to an exceptionally large and diverse wildlife population that is part of a complex and delicate ecosystem. The forests of Nagarhole are deciduous, both dry and wet in parts, which allow for the flourishing of a great variety of flora and fauna. They were lush and green now, revived after a long summer by the



monsoon that had just arrived. On entering the forest, we were at once immersed in the sound-scape of the jungle characterized by the loud and constant droning of cicadas. It was the pulse to which all forest life and activities took



place. It would temporarily cease when a vehicle passed by or when the jungle was in commotion over an approaching predator, to start up soon after.

To our left was a resplendent Peacock (*Pavo cristatus*) sitting atop a fallen tree. It looked as if it was sunning itself. It took off from its perch, flew over our vehicle to land on the road behind us with its splendid plumage partly displayed – an extremely graceful maneuver that took less than half a minute at best. As we drove on (casting furtive glances at shrubs and treetops for an elusive tiger or leopard), we came upon two elephants – a mother with her young calf feeding behind a bush. She snorted warningly when she saw

us and moved over in front of her calf protectively. Venkat, our jocular but well-informed guide, showed us a sand pit not far from where these animals stood. Elephants came here to trample upon the loose moist mud (made by forest authorities) and eat it. Mud apparently had salt and calcium, which they needed as most of their plant-based diet had little of this. It also seemed to be a cure for indigestion. These mud pits were dug all over the sanctuary at different points to facilitate this need of the big animal.

Up ahead on a branch was seated a Crested Serpent Eagle (*Spilornis cheela*) watching us nonchalantly. It was a big and beautiful bird visibly exuding grace and power. We emerged on to the southern shore of the Kabini and parked for a while amongst some bamboos hoping to make some 'prize' sightings. Some Spotted Deer were grazing some distance away to our right, while a Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*) was pecking for food on the waterline.

We watched the river for a while upon which we had taken a boat cruise the day before. How different things looked - depending from where one was viewing it! We turned around to head back and took another route, noting many fallen trees, either from age or thunder storms. Long lines of teak trees stood on either side of the forest path. These were now integrated into the rest of the jungle flora. They were planted in the early years by the Forest Department as commercial plantations. Again, we started to scan the undergrowth where, Venkat told us, a tigress was seen resting just a few days ago. On a couple of occasions, this great beast was also spotted lying in the middle of the road.



We were in tiger country after all! Nagarhole has a resident population of 76 members of this illustrious family, *Panthera tigris*. It is amongst the largest in the world. But large as its numbers may be, it was anything but ubiquitous and you needed more than patience or determination to spot it. You needed to be lucky!

Speaking of numbers, Nagarhole is also home to about 300 species of birds and hosts the largest concentration of the Asiatic Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) along with Bandipur and Mudumalai , all of them contiguous wildlife sanctuaries stretching across two states of India.



(*Semnopithecus entellus*) reveling in their treetop antics. They were the ‘alarm systems’ of the jungle, giving off early warning signals to other animals of approaching (or scented) predators, particularly the big cats.

As we turned off the forest onto the main road to head back to the vehicle camp, a Cicada flew in and settled upon the shoulder of one of us. *There are more than a thousand species of Cicada and Nagarhole has a variety of species native to it.*

Venkat picked it up and let us have a close look at this drone of the forest. God, we wondered, how could such a shrill and loud sound emanate from something this small?

Apparently it had a membrane (tymbal) beneath its abdomen against which it rubs intensely. The abdomen is a hollow chamber and acts as an amplifier causing this earnest rubbing to emit piercing sounds that can reach up to 120 decibels – louder than your average rock band or discotheque!

Another naturalist (Vineith, who you will meet soon on the night trail story) put it rather tellingly when he remarked that if you could take two Cicadas into your car, roll up the windows and ‘turn them on’ - chances are that you may not hear them after a while as you could have become hearing impaired by then!

This forest (like any true forest) is a mixed bag of sights, surprises and lessons.

To understand the forest fully it is not enough to use just your eyes. You have to smell it and listen to it as well to let it impact you thoroughly. A forest shows us the pristine hand of creation and helps to remind us that we are all one, sharing a common evolutionary heritage and ancestry that makes us no less or more significant than the animals we come out to see. Their futures and ours are connected. And their survival depends a lot on our intercessions and ingenuity as much as on our understanding and empathy.

