

my tigers my stories

BY SHOVARNA UPADHYAY





AUTHOR AND
PHOTOGRAPHER

Shovna Upadhyay

Shovna Upadhyay grew up in a small house called Sano Bangala, in the heart of Kathmandu, Nepal. A huge patch of land, with hundreds of tall trees, was part of the property. This was home to a plethora of wild denizens, such as serpents, squirrels, lizards, jackals, various kinds of insects, several birds and other mammals, including a colony of bats. By the age of six, Shovna had become an expert at climbing trees and would be found sitting on or hanging upside down from a branch, most of the day. Everything about the natural world fascinated her. For hours, she would observe worms wriggling in and out of the soil or watch a bunch of frog eggs in fascination, hoping to catch the tadpoles hatching. If not observing creepy-crawlies, she would lie on a blanket draped over one of her special thick branches and read a book.

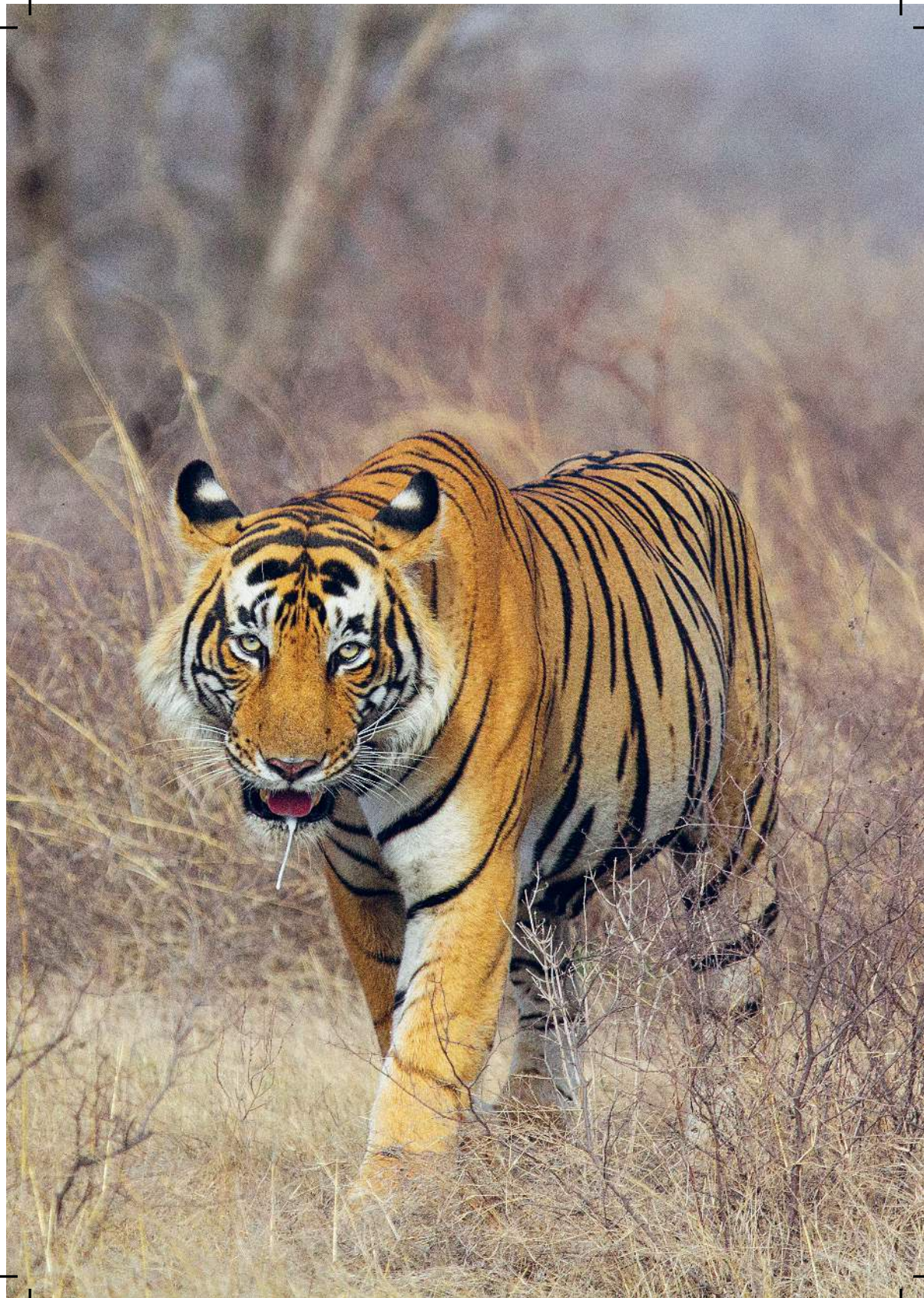
As an adult, far removed from the wild, Shovna moved from city to city and country to country. In 2011, during her maiden trip to a national park in India, all the memories of her childhood came flooding back. She fell in love with the wilderness all over again. During her trips to Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve and Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve she found a kindred soul in tigers. Now, she occasionally makes pit stops at her home in Delhi, while spending the rest of her time wandering the jungles.

COVER Lightning's unique expression

OPPOSITE T6, tired and with a frothy mouth, after a long walk marking his territory

PUBLISHED BY







In sweet memory of my Ma,
Sajani Bhandary Upadhyay

PLACES MENTIONED IN THE BOOK



KEY TO THE MAP

- 1 Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve
- 2 Corbett Tiger Reserve
- 3 Kaziranga National Park
- 4 Nawegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserve
- 5 Panna Tiger Reserve
- 6 Pench Tiger Reserve
- 7 Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve
- 8 Sariska Tiger Reserve
- 9 Umred-Pauni-Karhandla Wildlife Sanctuary



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Foreword

My tryst with the jungle has been through the stories told by my father and his cousins, of their night-time escapades into the jungle, near our ancestral home in the terai region of Nepal, in search of tigers and leopards. Those dreamlike stories have stayed with me all these years and once I read "*My Tigers, My Stories*" all the memories became fresh and vivid. One of the most profound saying that comes to my mind when I think about the jungles and their inhabitants is from The Mahabharata, "Do not cut down the forest with its tigers and do not banish the tigers from the forest. The tiger perishes without the forest and the forest perishes without its tigers. Therefore the tiger should stand guard over the forest and the forest should protect all its tigers." How very relevant this saying is today!

Nature has provided for all, but the ever-increasing human population has already taken too much from this earth — to live on and for food — resulting in an ever-decreasing space for our co-inhabitants. It is a great initiative taken by thirteen countries by pledging to double their tiger population in the wild by 2020. At the same time, I must stress that this is one half of the task and the second half is to ensure that there is enough space for these territorial animals to thrive freely and wildly. Each one of us must take things into our own hands to see that the protected areas for wildlife are forever protected and barren places are revived by afforestation and reforestation.

I have known Shovna Upadhyay for quite some time now and I too believe that it is necessary to see that our forests and wildlife are protected. I like the way she has written this book, starting from the prologue where she tells her readers why she has put her experiences together, to explaining various tiger behaviours she has witnessed in the wild and backing these observations with photographs makes this a unique book. The text is written in a simple and descriptive way and the photographs are beautiful.

When I heard that she was into wildlife photography, I knew that the passion must have been strong because it is not easy to leave a comfortable job and follow a dream. After going through this pictorial book, I now fully understand her love for the jungle and this majestic animal.

Through this book, "*My Tigers, My Stories*", I too have found a way to lend my voice to the voiceless animals of the wild. I want to emphasise that we must all fight and win the battle against those poaching not only tigers, but also other wild animals. Let's all pledge to do whatever we can to stop poaching and spread awareness about the importance of conservation and protection of nature. I compliment Shovna for trying, in her own way, to raise awareness through her stories about the importance of tigers in the forest.

My best wishes for the book to reach as many people as possible.

Manisha Koirala

Manisha Koirala



Prologue

Pressing the pause button while watching *The Jungle Book*, my five-year-old daughter, Serena, got up. She put the remote control carefully down on the table, turned her back to the television and faced me with a frown.

With both hands on her waist and folds on the top of her brows still intact, she looked at me intensely and said, "I do not like Shere Khan." Something had obviously upset her.

I asked her, "Okay, so who do you like?"

Instantly, a smile spread across her cherubic face and while clapping her hands she said, "Baloo!"

I asked her, "Any reason for not liking the tiger, Shere Khan?"

She said, "Mamma, tigers are bad, they eat people up!"

I explained the laws of nature to her and also that tigers do not go about harming people but she was not convinced.

Many years passed, my little girl had become big, but every now and then the conversation I had with my five-year-old would pop up in my mind. I started visiting and spending a lot of time in the jungles. The more I got to know about tigers, the more I thought about that particular remark. After my second trip, I began writing detailed accounts of my observations and experiences in the tiger reserves.



One day, after reading about one of my trips, Serena persuaded me to create a blog and I started publishing my stories online. Whenever I wrote about one of my jungle trips, my daughter and I would read and discuss the draft together, before finalising and uploading it. This became a post-holiday ritual for us.

Predators have been widely misrepresented in comics, storybooks, cartoons, movies and even folklore. People both fear and revere them. When we read about Little Red Riding Hood and the 'wicked' wolf or see a photograph of a tiger with a deer kill, we immediately think, what an

awful tiger, how could he harm poor 'Bambi'? Through our understanding of what we see and read, we are psychologically tuned to believe that tigers and wolves are horrible creatures that we should be scared of, and whenever they get a chance they will eat up the Little Red Riding Hoods, Mowglis and Bambis of the world! We forget that it is the circle of life that predators hunt Bambis and other mammals, as these are their natural food, which, in turn, maintains the balance in nature. Unlike humans, animals kill for survival, not for pleasure or sport.

At other times, whenever I have

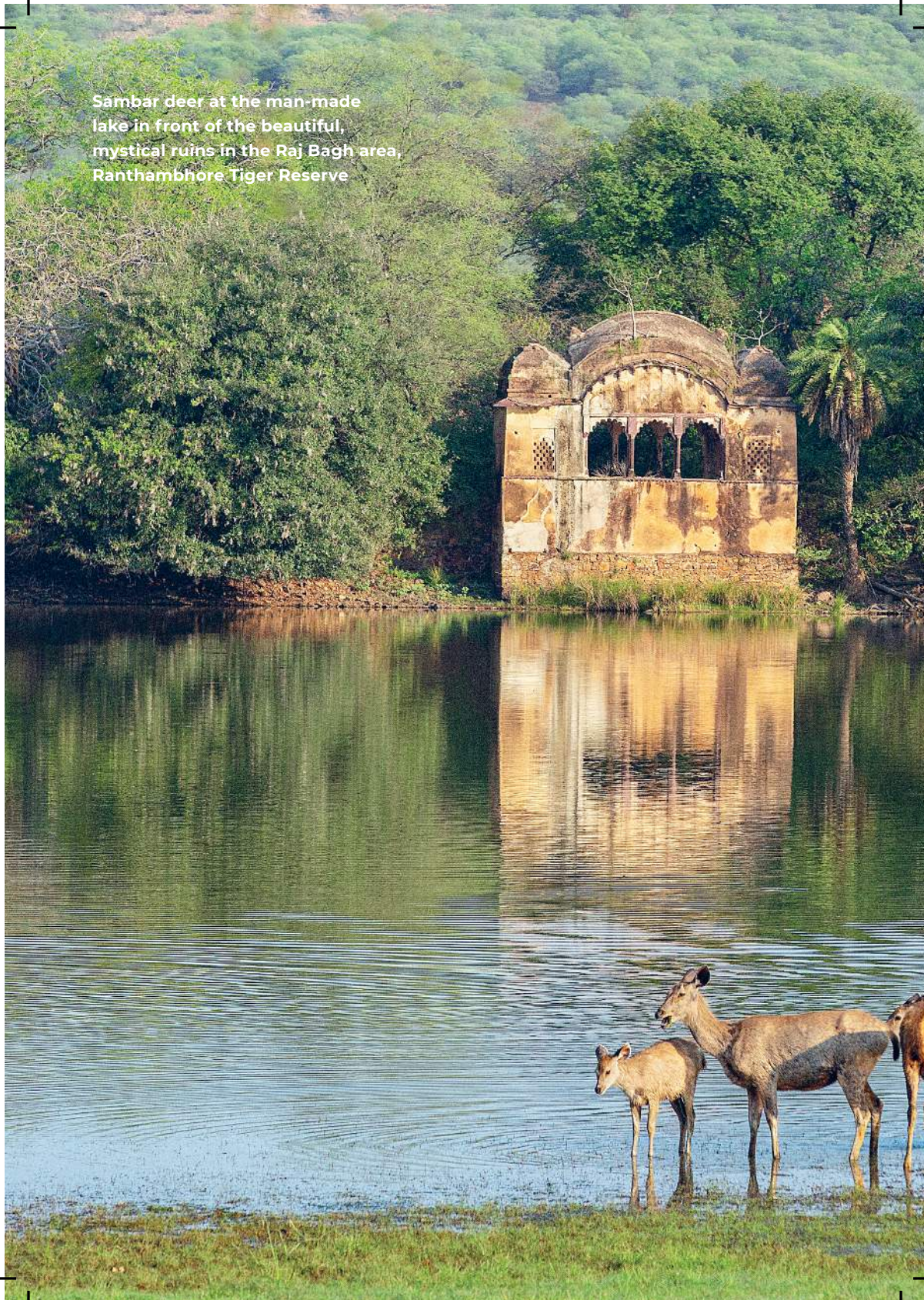


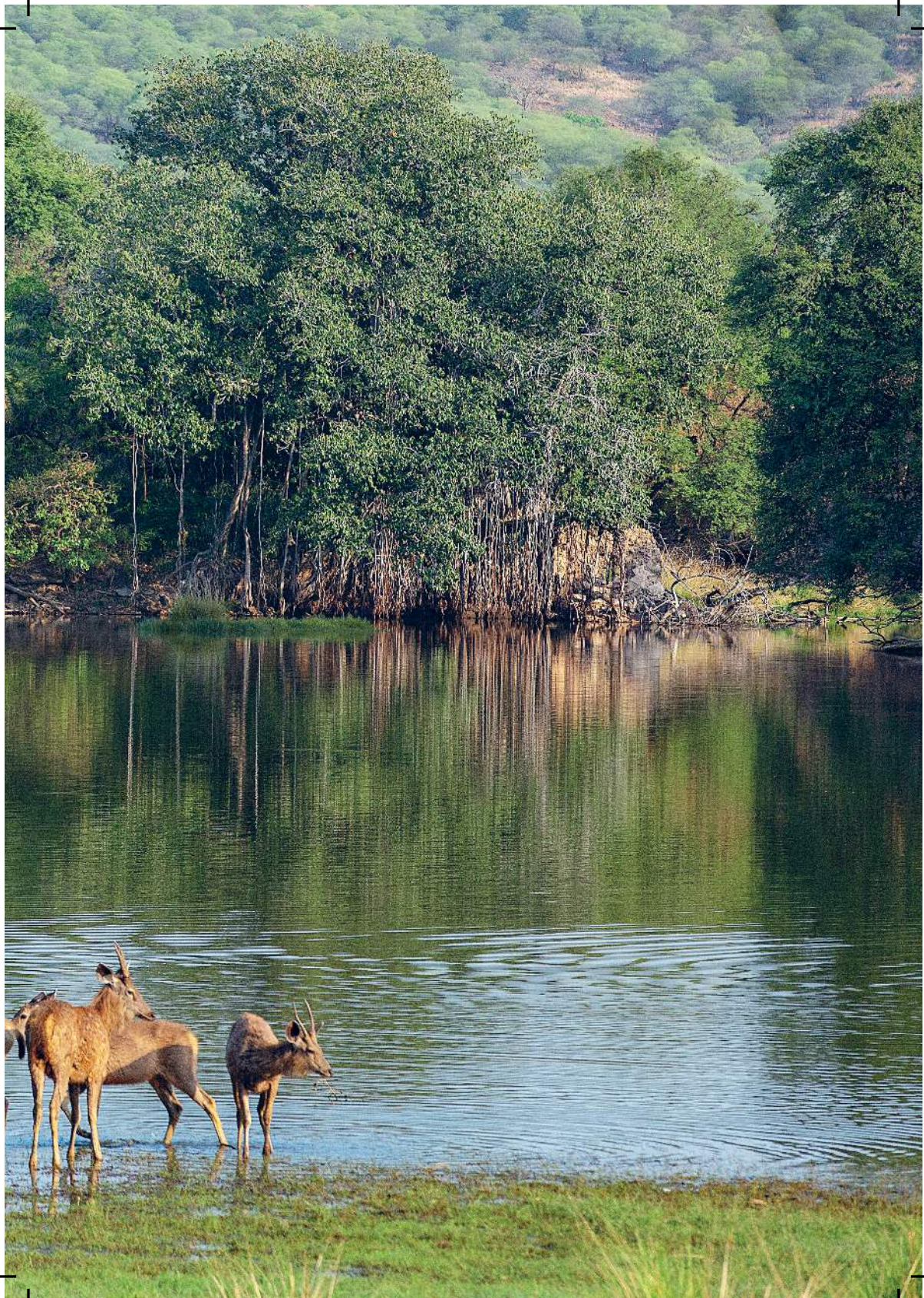
narrated stories about my trips and about how I saw tigers to my friends and family, those with less exposure to such predators have invariably reacted in the same way. “You saw a tiger so close. That sounds scary!” “The tiger could have attacked you!” “Do not go near tigers!” Exclamations like these have pushed me to put all my stories about tigers into this book. I’m hoping that, in a small way, this attempt will help change people’s perceptions about tigers.

There are probably more children out there who feel the same way about Shere Khan as my daughter once did. Then, there are probably adults who

would react the same way my friends and family do. While reading this pictorial collection of my blogs, I hope people can come to see tigers through my eyes... see them for the majestic yet fierce animals that they are! I’m not an expert on tigers and have written about my personal experiences and observations. I have also added stories as I’ve heard them from guides, drivers and people whose lives and work revolve around the periphery of these regal cats. Most importantly, what I am sharing here is my love and respect for these magnificent animals, and also those memorable post-holiday rituals between my daughter and I.

Sambar deer at the man-made lake in front of the beautiful, mystical ruins in the Raj Bagh area, Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve







How It All Started...

During a trip to Delhi in 2011, my meeting was postponed and I suddenly had five extra days, with nothing to do. I had recently acquired a new DSLR camera and was eager to use it. While flipping through a photography magazine, I saw an advertisement for a wildlife photography trip to Kaziranga National Park in Assam. Despite no idea about wildlife and even less about wildlife photography, I still decided to take the trip. At the airport, I met a few of the participants, who were talking about metering, ISO, manual, AV, etc. Listening to the entire camera lingo, I had a few second thoughts, but since I was already there I put on a brave face

and decided to carry on to Kaziranga.

Kaziranga National Park is well known for the Big Five – One-horned Rhinoceros, Royal Bengal Tigers, Elephants, Wild Water Buffaloes and Swamp Deer, and also has a wide variety of birds. This large national park is dominated by beautiful meadows of elephant grass, soaring trees and marshy swamps. My visit was during the end of winter, when the Flame of the Forest trees are in full bloom. The fallen flowers on the ground had formed a thick mosaic carpet, in gorgeous hues of scarlet and amber. Along the stream there were several otters bobbing their heads,

OPPOSITE Tigress T17, Machhli's daughter, in the Jogi Mahal area in Ranthambhore



ABOVE A massive rhinoceros with his armoured hide, walks past nonchalantly in Kaziranga National Park

swimming in groups to catch eels for breakfast. Several species of birds were perched on trees, each singing their own song. The mixed tunes formed a soothing melody rather than a cacophonous orchestra. Amongst this feathery choir was a grey-headed fish eagle, feeding on a fish while perched on a branch, totally disinterested in the daily rituals of its brethren. Unusually for that time of the year – well, that was my perception – a large family

of elephants was playing in the water. I was awestruck by the submerged elephant calves who had their trunks sticking out of the water, raised to the sky as if praying. The most fascinating sight was a hefty female rhino puffing through her nostrils in irritation while making a rather elegant U-turn, and then waltzing away. I wanted to stand up and applaud this graceful performance. In the midst of these jungle activities, all the feelings

that I had as a child that had been lying dormant my whole adult life, exploded like a volcano. My love for the wilderness had been reignited!

People who have found their calling will generally be able to pinpoint the exact moment when their hobby turned into a passion. Mine is a similar story, except that mine is not only a passion but has now become a way of life. After my love for the wild was reignited in Kaziranga, I continued my journey of rediscovery by visiting various tiger reserves in India. It was during one of these trips that I had a life-changing moment – an intimate

interaction with tigers, especially the unforgettable T17.

I fell in love with these magnificent animals in Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan, when I had a close encounter with T17 the tigress, aka Sundari, which, aptly enough, means beautiful in Hindi. Time seemingly stood still when we saw T17 prowling on the track – the paths designated by the forest department for tourist vehicles to move on. After walking for fifteen minutes or so, Sundari sat down in a pool of water. She looked supremely comfortable even with all the vehicles in the vicinity – it seemed

BELOW How can you not fall in love when a tigress looks at you like this!



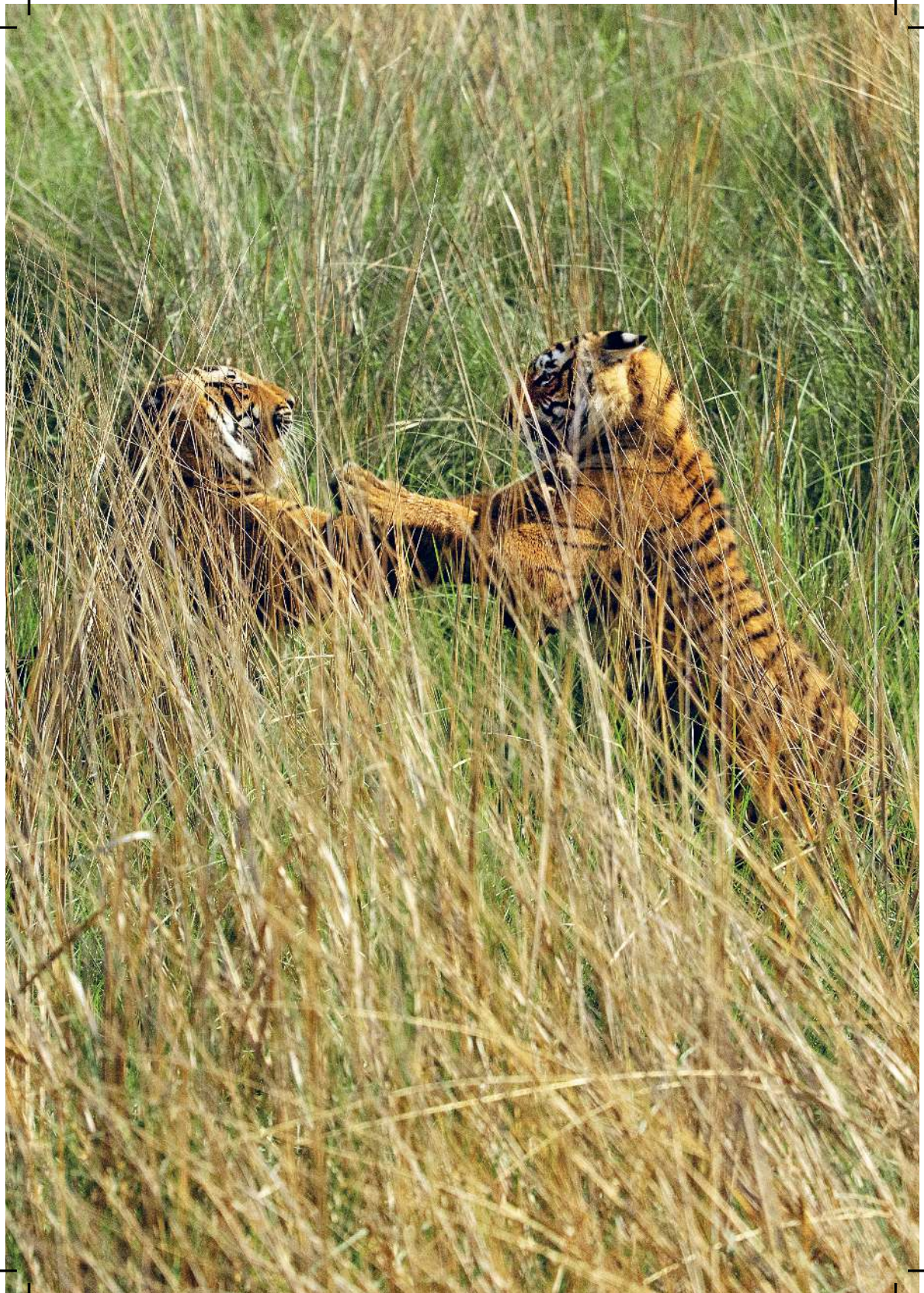


like she was accustomed to humans and safari jeeps. After a short rest, she got up and walked straight towards our jeep. She paused and raised her head to look directly at me. I lost track of time and my surroundings. I was totally mesmerised by her. She then turned and walked away regally, with no hurry at all, deep into the jungle, until the forest and the stripes blended so well that I could not differentiate between the two. That eye contact with her was the deciding factor for me to wander into the jungles of India. I seriously started thinking about spending more time in the wild, searching for more.

The Ranthambhore forest, once the hunting grounds for the Maharajas of Jaipur, was declared a national park in 1980. This jungle is dotted with man-made lakes and small *mahals* (palaces), making it a unique reserve. These mahals served as resting places and picnic spots for the Maharaja's guests, who participated in the hunting expeditions, but have since then been left in ruins, adding to the mystique of this place. Some of the areas in Ranthambhore have dry and arid soil with scanty, thorny shrubs and bushes growing in most parts,

while in other parts, especially near the lakes and water bodies, there are lush green grasslands with tall trees. There are active places of worship on the periphery and inside the protected areas. On religious days and occasions, massive hordes of pilgrims descend on these places, on foot, bikes, and in cars and buses. People working in the tiger reserve have stories to tell about visitors who have come face to face with tigers while walking to the temples but have never been harmed by any wild animal. In the past two decades, Ranthambhore has become popular because of a tigress called Machhli and the increasing number of tiger sightings.

Apart from the close encounter with T17, Ranthambhore holds a special place in my heart as this is the place where I have observed interactions between mothers and cubs, have had the most tiger sightings and ample opportunities to observe different tiger activities and behaviours. It is also a place that is uniquely ironic – the hunting palaces of the kings have now become part of the protected tiger reserve with a thriving population of tigers, leopards, other mammals, amphibians and birds!



Whiskers And Stripes

Tiger reserves in India are divided into various zones such as the core zone, the tourist zone and the buffer zone. The core zone is where human movement and economic activities like gathering fodder for cattle, wood for cooking, mining, etc., are strictly prohibited. This is to ensure that the wildlife is not disturbed. The tourist zone, which might only be 20% of the total forest, is where visitors are allowed. The buffer zone is the periphery of the whole protected area where, in some cases, villages still exist and villagers are permitted to forage for sustenance. Tourist vehicles are allowed in the buffer and tourist

zones but fewer animals are found there. The tourist and buffer areas are further divided into smaller zones to ensure better control over the number of vehicles entering each zone.

It was the first safari of the day during a trip to Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve, and my excitement knew no bounds. As soon as we entered the allotted zone, we heard *cheetal* alarm calls – the sounds that cheetals make when they sense a predator nearby. The driver drove the jeep towards the ruckus. By the time we reached the area, langurs too had joined in making alarm calls. Gibbering and chattering, they were looking down from the trees

OPPOSITE Two playful young cubs mock-fighting behind the cover of tall grass

at a particular spot. The guide was sure that a tiger was somewhere under those trees, hidden from our view by the shrubs. Then a novice, I immediately readied my camera, thinking that the big cat would emerge any minute from the shrubbery. However, there appeared to be no signs of a tiger.

After quite a long wait, the langurs suddenly again started making frantic sounds and jumping on branches. Mothers held their young ones tightly to their bosoms and rapidly climbed higher up into the trees. I scanned the ground below, between the shrubs and tall grass to see what was agitating the langurs, but there was nothing. Only when the tigress raised her tail up in the air, did I realise that she had been there all along. Had she not lifted her tail, we would not have known she was resting under the tree, right in front of us!

On another day, after bumping its way down a rocky path, the jeep reached a dead-end when my guide pointed with his chin and whispered, "Tiger, tiger!" I craned my neck to see, but could not spot anything. Then I saw a movement and there she was, a tigress sitting on summer leaves scattered on the ground, only her head visible between the rocks. She was tigress T39, aka Noor. T39 had totally blended in with her surroundings and my untrained eyes took some time to spot her, that too only when she moved, turning her head to look at the approaching jeeps and at the crows cawing above her.

On yet another safari, all the visitors were having a wonderful time watching the three sub-adult cubs of T19, aka Krishna. It was one of the most spectacular sightings one can

BELOW Can you spot the tiger's tail?





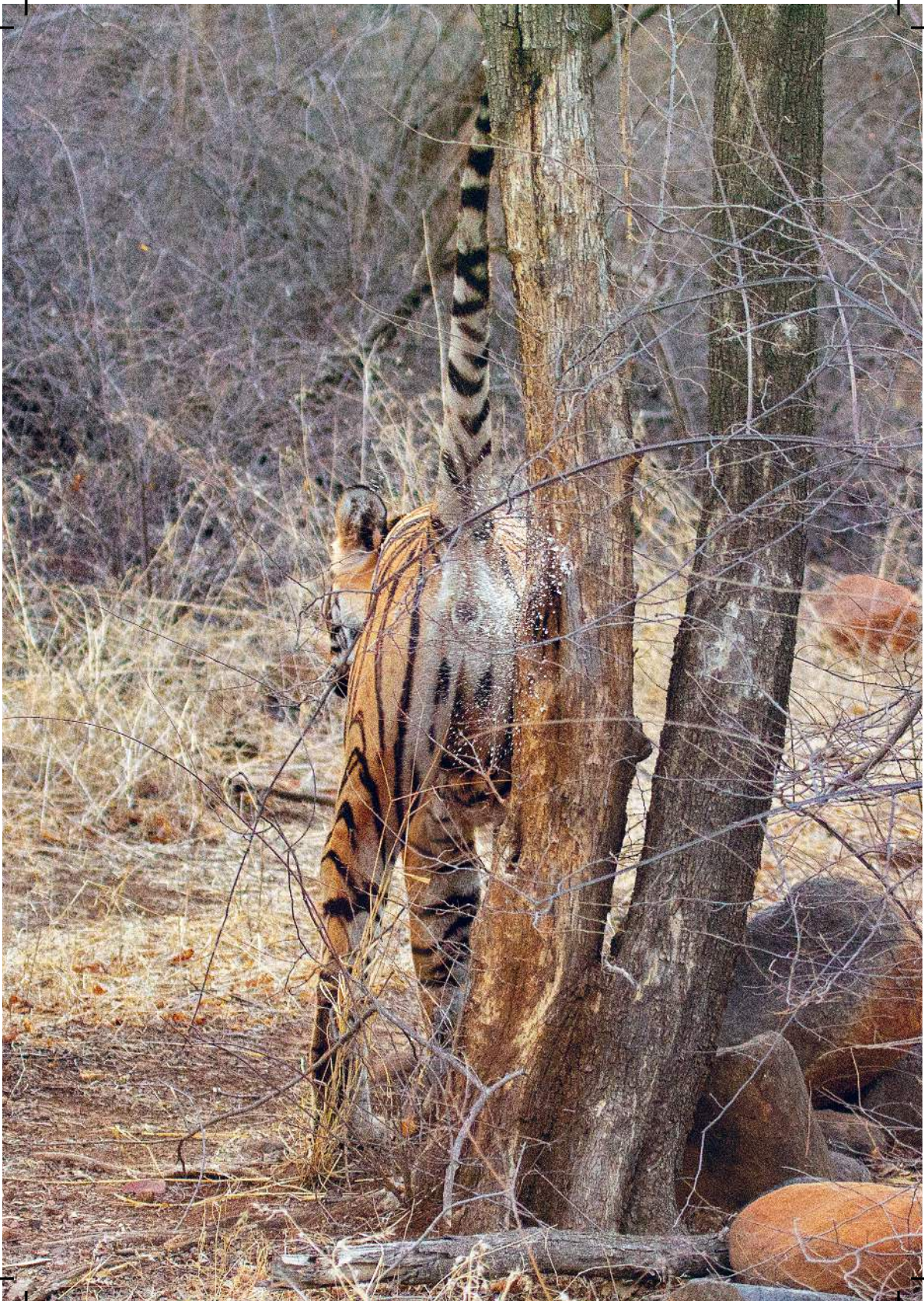
ABOVE Each stripes pattern is unique — no two are alike

imagine. The cubs were romping all over the place by the lake, against a backdrop of the fort and the glorious morning's clear blue skies. Then the siblings ran into the tall grass near the lake and I could not see them anymore. The guide tried his best to point them out to me for several minutes, but in vain. I clicked a photo of the area, zoomed in and finally spotted the cubs, but just as vague shapes.

Since tigers have three-coloured coats that provide natural camouflage and helps them blend into different vegetation and terrains, it is not easy to spot them. Recently, I was going through a collection of photographs I've taken, when I noticed that some tigers have light fur, while others have shorter and darker hair. In Corbett Tiger Reserve, the tigresses Paarwali and Sharmili have more prominent white fur and are fluffier on the belly

and neck, whereas Kankatti Junior of Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve and Backwater Female of Nagarhole National Park have a shorter coat with more conspicuous black stripes. That is when I realised that the colour and texture of the coat vary according to the climatic conditions. Then, there are male tigers like the handsome T42 aka Fateh at Ranthambhore, who has longish, fleecy fur around his cheeks called a ruff.

Besides alarm calls, another way of locating tigers is by following their pugmarks. Guides and drivers working in tiger reserves can tell whether the pugmarks are recent or old. They can also tell the gender of the tiger by looking at the size of the pugmarks. These telltale signs help, at times, to track tigers in vast tiger reserves, where their camouflage only makes it harder to find them.



I Came, I Saw, I Conquered

A three-day trip to Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve was planned with the sole purpose of photographing the dominant male of Zone 4 called T6, or Romeo. Completely aware that there are no guarantees when it comes to sightings, I was still adamant on at least trying to find that tiger. Both the driver and the guide knew my reason for the trip, so as soon as we reached T6's territory, we were totally focused on looking for the usual clues. We just needed a starting point. It was, however, one of those days where there were no alarm calls to go to, no pugmarks to follow and no signs indicating the presence or movement

of a tiger in the vicinity. I was slowly but surely losing hope. There was no point going round and round the zone without any leads, so we decided to wait in one place, hoping for a sign. In a little while, two vehicles came and parked in front of us. We were all looking ahead. I cannot explain why, but *something* made me turn around to look behind and there he was! The experience of that afternoon is etched indelibly in my memory, as a slow-motion movie clip. The regal swagger which could be mistaken for arrogance; the confidence exuding from the swish of the tail; the pride from the chin held high; the power

OPPOSITE T41 spray marking her territory, Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve

from the strongly defined tendril-like veins on the legs, neck and shoulders; the strength in the muscles tightening and relaxing with every stride – were all displays of his dominance. His mere presence, without a doubt, conveyed that he was the king of the area.

After coming out of my trance, I realised that I was not the only one who was mesmerised by this majestic male. From the admiration emanating from the expressions of the others, it was obvious that we were all equally fascinated with this tiger. We silently observed his behaviour in awe. He

swaggered onto the middle of the track, crisscrossing to the sides for a sniff here and there. Then he turned his nose up and sniffed a tree trunk, turned around, lifted his tail up and sprayed shots of urine on the tree – thus ‘scent marking’ or ‘spray marking’ his territory. After enthralling us for an hour, he went back into the woods, scent marking every few metres – on tree trunks, shrubs, rocks and any other elevated object in his path.

This action might look like urinating but it is actually spraying, and I have seen various tigers exhibiting this

BELOW T6 aiming high!



behaviour. It is one way through which both male and female tigers mark their territories. I have heard that tigresses also scent mark to protect their young cubs, which keeps intruders at bay.

In Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve, we were watching Banbei's two cubs frolicking around the Sita Mandap area. The cubs were around six months old. They were running in and out of the depressions in the rocks, chasing each other. Suddenly, both stopped playing and became alert. Wondering why, I tried my best to listen and looked around but I could not see or hear anything unusual. The cubs then started to walk towards the hills. The guide told me that most likely the mother was calling from the other side of the hill. They followed a route without hesitation, sniffing trees and shrubs along the way until I could see them no more. In my opinion, this could only be possible because of the scent left by the mother along the way. So it is probable that when responding to Banbei's call, the cubs knew exactly which route to follow to reach her by smelling the scent markings.

Apart from scent marking, a tiger marks its territory in several other ways — by dropping poop known as scat, by scratch marking and by digging or raking the ground. Have



ABOVE This is how we hashtag #iwashere #stayoutofmyterritory

you ever seen your pet dog digging up the earth in the garden? Tigers dig or rake the earth just like that. The pet could be using his forepaws vigorously digging out a bone it had previously buried, but for predators like tigers, it's their way of warning intruders and/or creating 'treasure hunts' for mates and dependents, by raking the earth by their hind paws. At other times, they squat and scat in areas where they feel it is important to show their presence and then rub their bottom on the ground. I have seen these behaviours by the tigresses Sharmili and Parwaali



ABOVE This big cat is dropping scat

in Corbett Tiger Reserve.

In the month of June, just before the tiger reserves close for the monsoon, I decided to go to Ranthambhore when the temperatures are normally around 40–45°C. There was a heavy shower early in the morning and it was drizzling during the safari, making the atmosphere sultry. Waiting at the lakeside, I was admiring one of the most stunning views I have ever seen inside a protected area. In this zone, there are *chhatris* (gazebos) and across a man-made lake, known as Padam Talo, there are ruins with huge open *jharokhas* (windows). Jutting rocks on

the lake and fallen trees have formed natural bridges, connecting the ruins to the other side of the lake, making it easy for animals to cross over.

Capturing images of a tiger in this area is every photographer's dream. Even I have wanted to see a tiger or a cub looking out from one of the *jharokhas*, or crossing the natural bridges, or a tiger lazily yawning under a *chhatri*. A rustling in the tall grass jolted me out of my daydream. All eyes were fixed on that spot and with bated breath, we were hoping a tiger would emerge. Unhurriedly and gracefully, the beauty of the lake, T17, appeared and walked

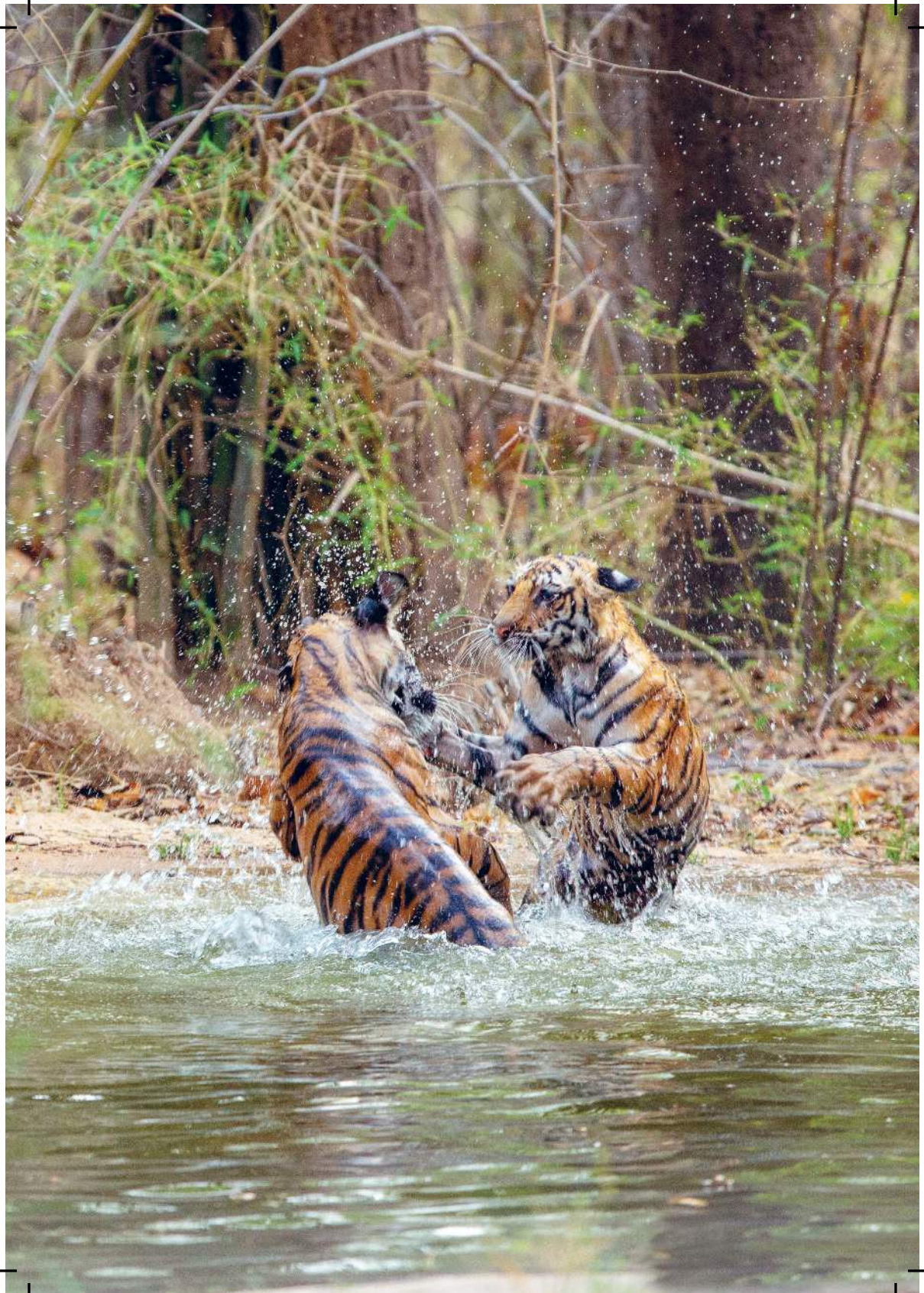
towards our parked jeep, stopping every now and then to sniff the grass. Right in front of us, she stooped to drink water from a rain puddle. After lapping up some water, she went to a tree and stood on her hind legs, then lifted her front legs to place them on the trunk. Stretching her front legs as far as she could, she brought down her paws, making scratch marks on the bark of the tree with her protracted claws. She was scratch marking, thus establishing occupancy and signalling to any tiger that might be venturing

into her territory to stay away.

Tigers may change or expand their territory, get displaced by their own sibling, parent, progeny or by a tiger from some other area. Tigers proliferate and thrive in places where the habitat is conducive and the prey base abundant. They patrol their land on a daily basis and leave markers behind to indicate ownership. I have had the opportunity to observe many different ways in which tigers mark their territories and I now understand how important these activities are for them.

BELOW Young tigress learning to mark her territory





Love For Water

In a jungle, one of the highest possibilities of sighting tigers is near water bodies. They don't go there to just quench their thirst, but they also like to cool down in the water after heavy meals, even in winters. Sariska Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan, is another place speckled with ruins and villages. The most spectacular sight is the Kankwadi Fort, which sits on elevated grounds in the middle, in one part of the tiger reserve. This fort was built during the reign of Aurangzeb, a seventeenth-century Mughal emperor. Aurangzeb imprisoned his brother Dara Shikoh here, before having him executed. This is another

place where I inevitably fall into a reverie. How would it have been in the days when the fort was being built? What a wonderful sight it would have been to see tigers roaming, amongst the tall date palm trees, under the huge fort. Did Dara get to look out of the windows and would he have seen tigers sauntering by in the vast open area? If he did, then those sightings would have been the only thing that made him forget about the sword hanging over his head.

In 2004, it was reported that tigers had been completely wiped out from Sariska as a result of rampant poaching. So eight tigers from Ranthambhore

OPPOSITE Cubs practising water kung-fu



ABOVE "I like to go backwards with a splash
BELOW ...so that I can doze off on my paws"



were radio-collared and released here. A guard was designated for each tiger, whose job was to monitor the tiger's whereabouts by reading the signals transmitted from the radio-collar to a handheld device.

The gentle breeze during my afternoon safari made the drive pleasant. In the morning, I had missed seeing a tigress by a whisker, while some visitors had seen her drag a kill inside the thickets. The driver headed straight towards that place and parked the jeep near a waterhole. Since the tigress had made a kill in the morning, there was a good chance that she would come to drink water in the evening. I always have mixed and overpowering emotions while waiting for a tiger to come out. That afternoon was no different. I was filled with excitement, nervousness and the 'will it happen' feeling. For good wildlife sightings, patience is key but during that waiting period, time passes rather slowly and a sinking feeling takes over. There was heavy forest cover in that area and the sun was beginning to set, so with every passing minute, the place was getting darker. I felt the panic in my throat when the driver said, "It will take ten minutes to reach the exit gate on time, so we only have five more minutes before heading back." Optimism is

a constant companion and I started reasoning with myself, thinking that if the tigress comes out now, then those five minutes will be more than enough to get a good look at her.

I was scared even to look through the viewfinder of my camera lest I miss anything with my naked eyes. There was a strong positive feeling of hope, the sound of a twig breaking, the rustling of leaves, was that a small growl, was it her breathing heavily? Every now and then I glanced up at the guide and the driver for a smile or a nod as an affirmation that she was indeed coming our way.

Finally! There she was, the tigress called ST9, walking slowly and gracefully. A wave of emotions take over when I actually see a tiger – the momentary freeze, blood rushing to the face, burning cheeks, goosebumps on the arms and neck, jolts of current passing throughout my body and trembling hands. After coming to my senses I watched her intently, lest I miss a single movement!

She slowly came up to the waterhole. First, she drank some water while gazing at us and then she turned around and went a bit ahead. It seemed as if she was going away, but then, she walked backwards. She put one hind leg into the water and then

the other, slowly moving backwards into the waterhole, letting the water gradually come up her body. Her rear was now deeper into the water and her forelegs were just at the edge of the waterhole. A renowned wildlife photographer had once told me that the pads on the soles of a tiger's paws are very sensitive and thus help to check the temperature of the water. Was ST9 letting her body slowly get accustomed to the cold water of late winter? She then settled down comfortably and turned sideways to drink some more.

Whenever I've seen tigresses ST9 of Sariska and Kankatti Junior of Bandhavgarh, they have walked

backwards into the water. I can say, solely based on my observations, that tigers who want to rest for a longer period place their lower body in the deeper end of the water. They position their front paws at the edge of the waterhole and rest their head on the paws so that they can doze off without getting their eyes wet.

On the other hand, whenever I have seen Paarwali of Corbett Tiger Reserve getting into the water, it has always been from the front. She is everyone's favourite and fulfils the dreams of visitors by giving them ample photo opportunities in the waterhole and surrounding areas. In 2017, on my last visit of the season, she came down a

BELOW "I am a river girl, I like to see where I go"





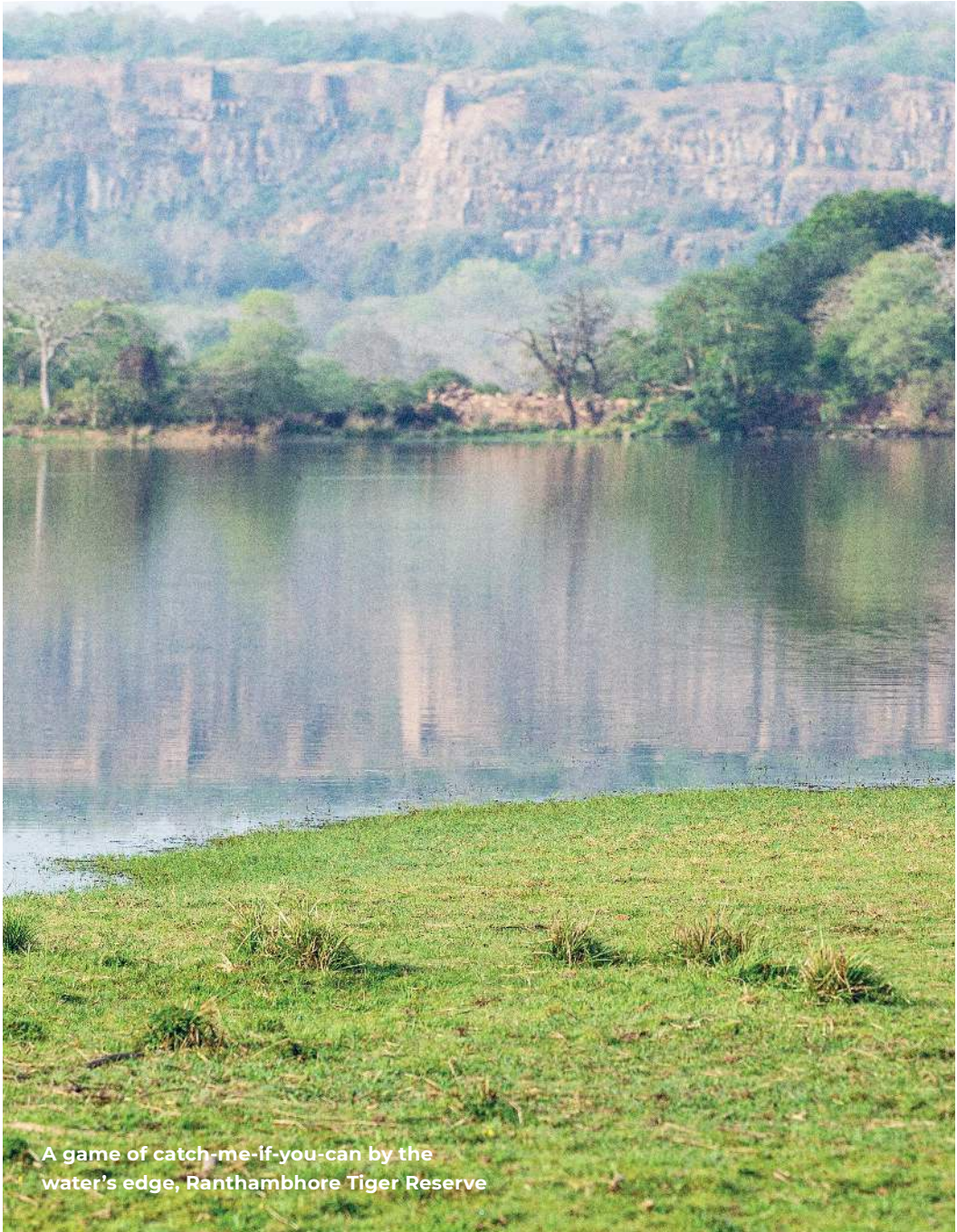
ABOVE The water feels blissful on a hot summer day

hillock to the stream and drank some water. She then dipped her paw and shook off the excess. I wondered if that was another way of checking the water temperature as I have seen her do it many times! She then slowly went deeper, until the water reached her shoulders. She sat there with her eyes half-closed in bliss, with the water now up to her neck. I have seen her enjoying that waterhole several times and have also seen her swim across the Ramganga river, but I've noticed that she never lets the water come up to her eyes.

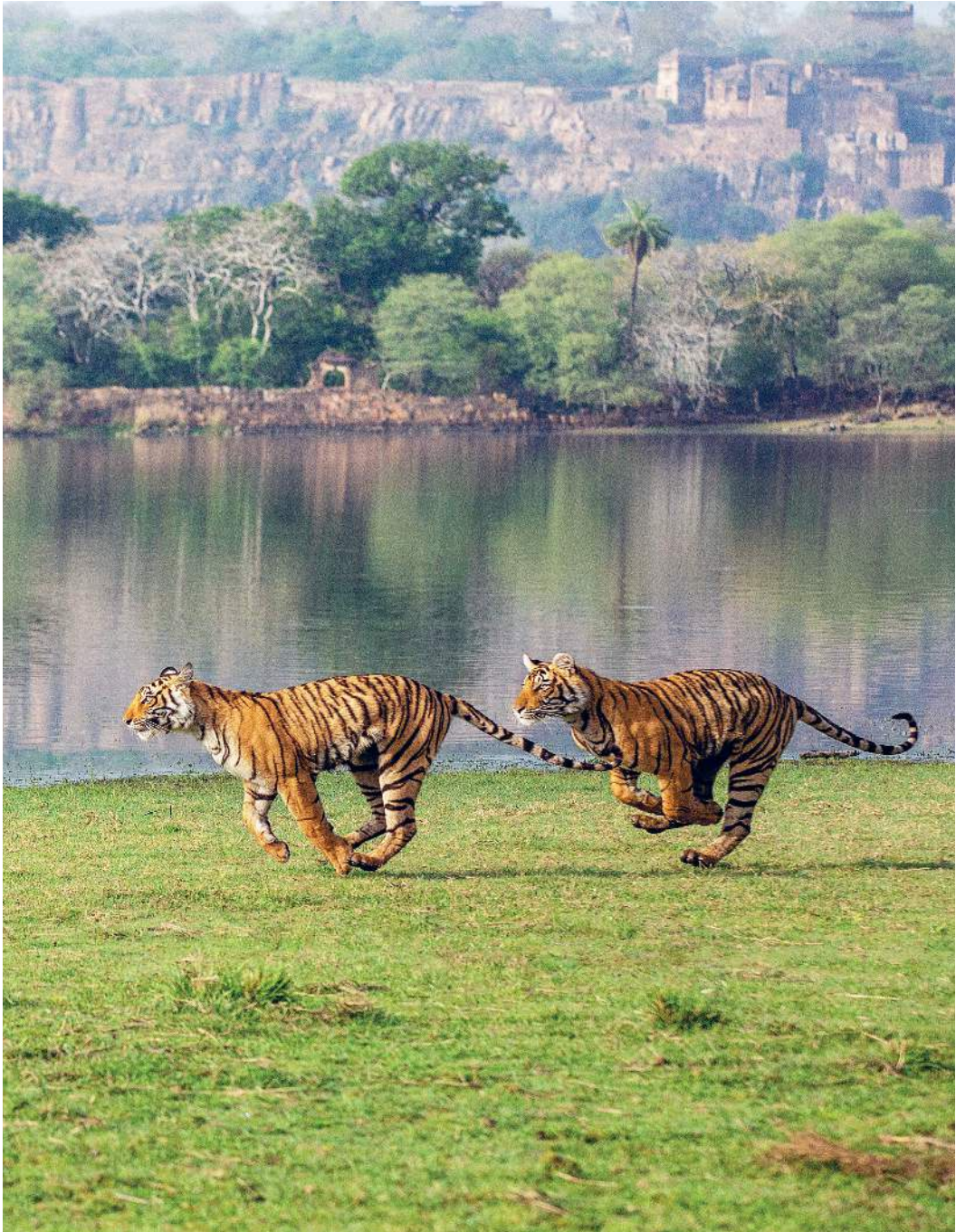
While adult tigers don't like water going in their eyes, cubs, on the other hand, like to splash, play and do not mind putting their heads in the water.

On a safari in Bandhavgarh, our driver had parked the jeep on the side of a track, positioning it in such a way that we got a fairly good view of three cubs playing at the edge of a waterhole. A cub suddenly jumped into the water, followed by one of its siblings. They started playing by diving, splashing, pushing and pouncing on each other.

Finally, the last one joined in. Two of the cubs ganged up and pushed the third one's head into the water. After holding it down for a while, they let go and his head bobbed up. He then chased the other two, splashing water everywhere. When the father came, they stopped playing and relaxed in the water alongside him, but only for a few minutes. Soon the water games



A game of catch-me-if-you-can by the water's edge, Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve



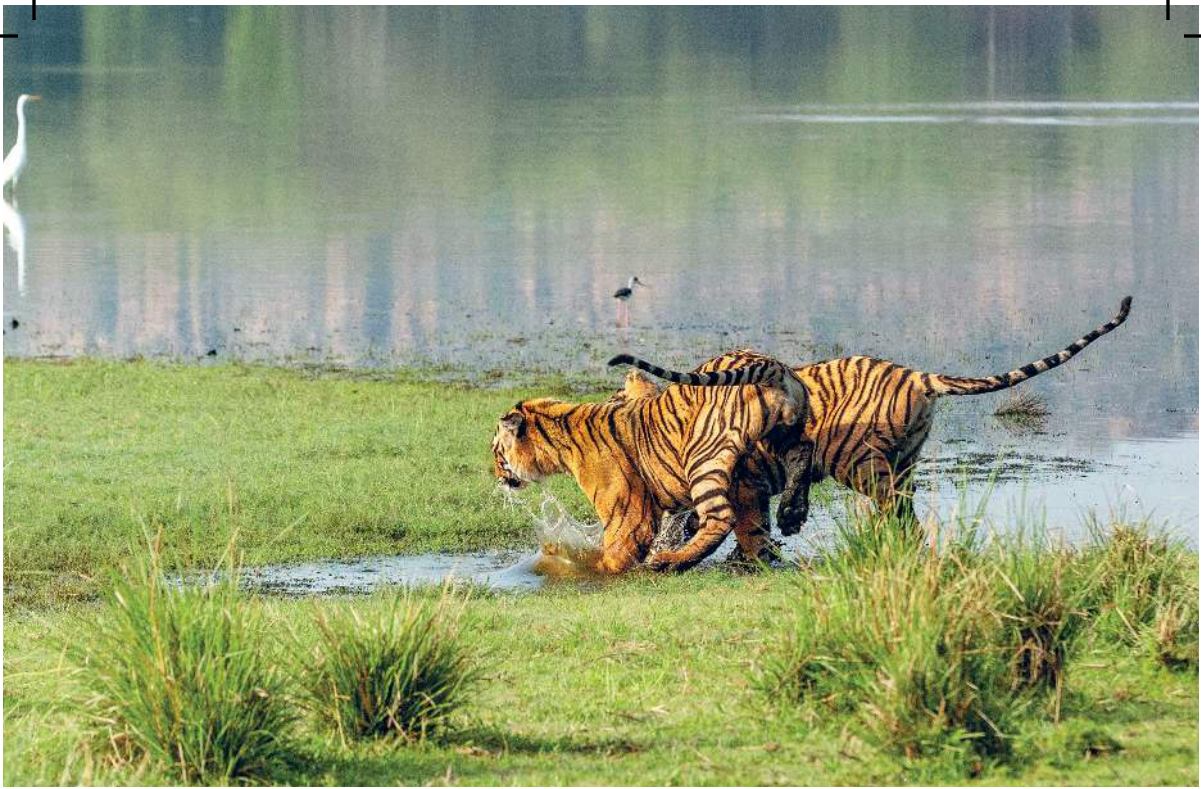


ABOVE This one has literally caught a tiger by its tail and it can only end in a splash

started all over again. One of the siblings tried to get out of the water, another pulled it by the tail and they both fell backwards with a splash. The activities in the water went on for almost an hour. The father finally got up and walked away, with the cubs trotting behind in tow.

On another occasion in Ranthambhore, I spent a lovely afternoon with the three cubs of T19. The mother and her one male and two female sub-adult cubs came out from the tall grass at one end of the lake. The cubs dashed ahead and sat in a puddle of water. The male was a little shy,

but when it came to water games, even he joined in, though a little bashfully. The mother gracefully continued and entered some thickets. As if on cue, the cubs sprang out of the puddle and ran behind, with water dripping from their bodies. It looked like they were racing each other for a prize – perhaps the mother’s full attention or longer cuddles? At that time, all three cubs looked the same to me. However, on a visit three months later, I was able to recognize the male and female cubs by the markings on their foreheads. They were the siblings Arrowhead and Pacman.



ABOVE A race to the water's edge with no speed control
BELOW Running off with a murky bottom





What's In A Name?

In my early safari days, all tigers looked the same to me. I would be in awe when friends used to recognise tigers by looking at the stripes and facial markings. Soon I learnt that all tigers have different stripes on their bodies and different facial markings, so no two tigers have the same pattern. The uniqueness of their stripe patterns offers an easier way to identify tigers and tell them apart. For example, there is a tigress in Ranthambhore who has markings that look like arrows on her forehead, so she is called Arrowhead. Another tiger who has a dollar sign on one side of his body is named Dollar. Pacman has the famous arcade game

character on his forehead, thus his name. And India's most famous tigress had a pattern that looked like a fish on her left brow, so the name Machhli.

I had this compelling urge to go to a tiger reserve as soon as they opened after the monsoon break. Since I reside in Delhi, Ranthambhore was the most convenient choice, because it was a quick overnight journey.

While on the safari, we were heading towards the lake when we heard alarm calls in the distance. As we reached the area, we saw a tigress on the side of the track, smelling a tree trunk. She turned, spray marked a tree and walked towards us. It was a wonderful

OPPOSITE This Pacman is way more amazing than his namesake



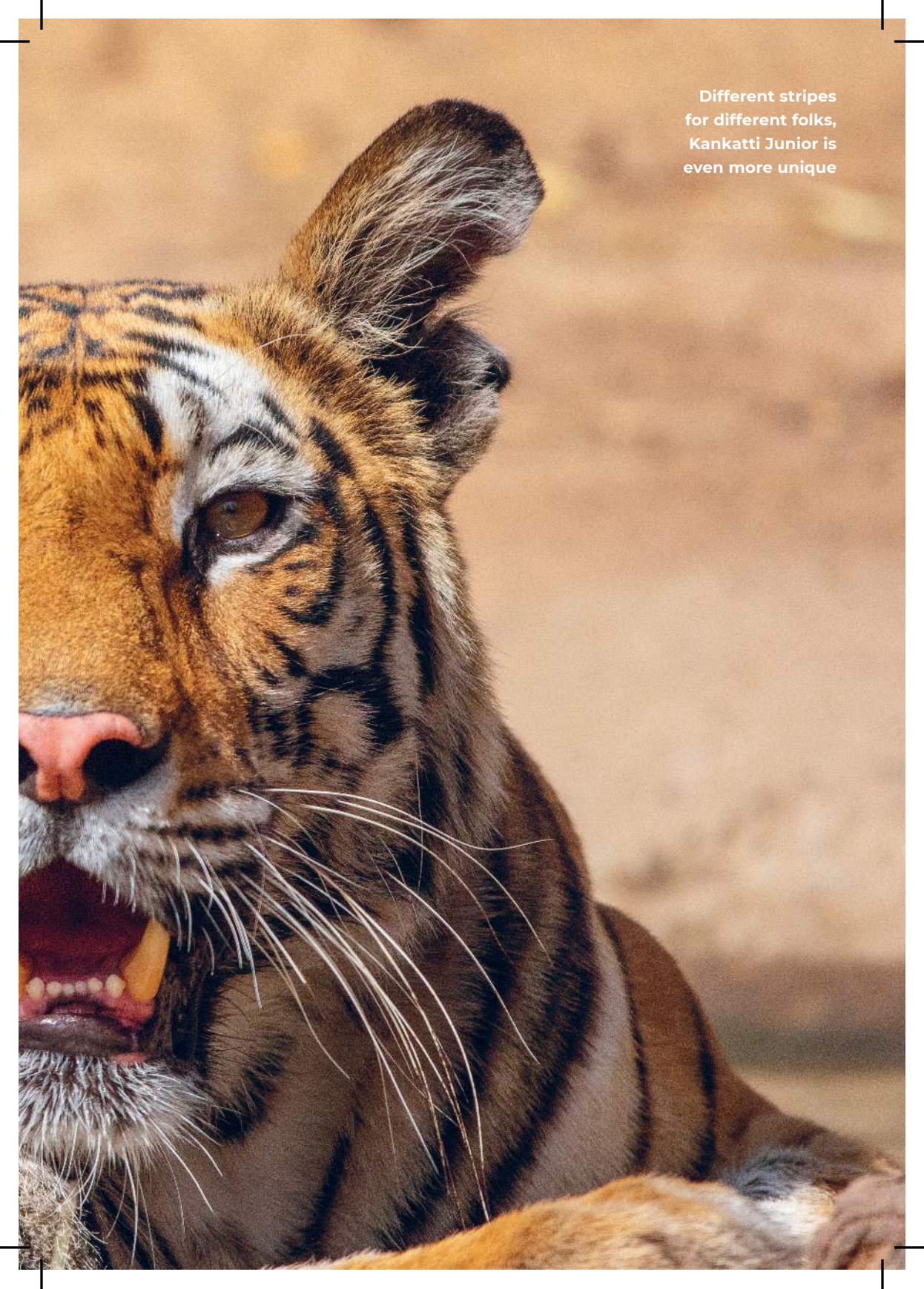
ABOVE Jai's injured nose doesn't detract from his handsome face at all

moment as I immediately recognised her from her facial markings. She was one of the cubs I had seen play in the waterhole along with her siblings! It was Arrowhead, who was all grown up and independent now. She had marked her own territory by ousting her mother and sister and was reigning over the lake area. I was quite pleased with my skill of identifying tigers by their facial markings!

Apart from stripes and facial markings, there are other ways of identifying tigers — scars after an injury and congenital anomalies are

some of them. The injury may heal, but if it is deep, it will leave a visible mark. Jai, a tiger in the Nawegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra, had an injury atop his nose. A discolouration on the skin remained even after the wound had healed. He was named Jai but that scar was unique to him alone and because of that mark, it was easy to differentiate between him and his brother, Veeru. Therefore, it was not because of the given name, but because of the scar that we could identify him as Jai.

In Bandhavgarh, a tigress called



Different stripes
for different folks,
Kankatti Junior is
even more unique

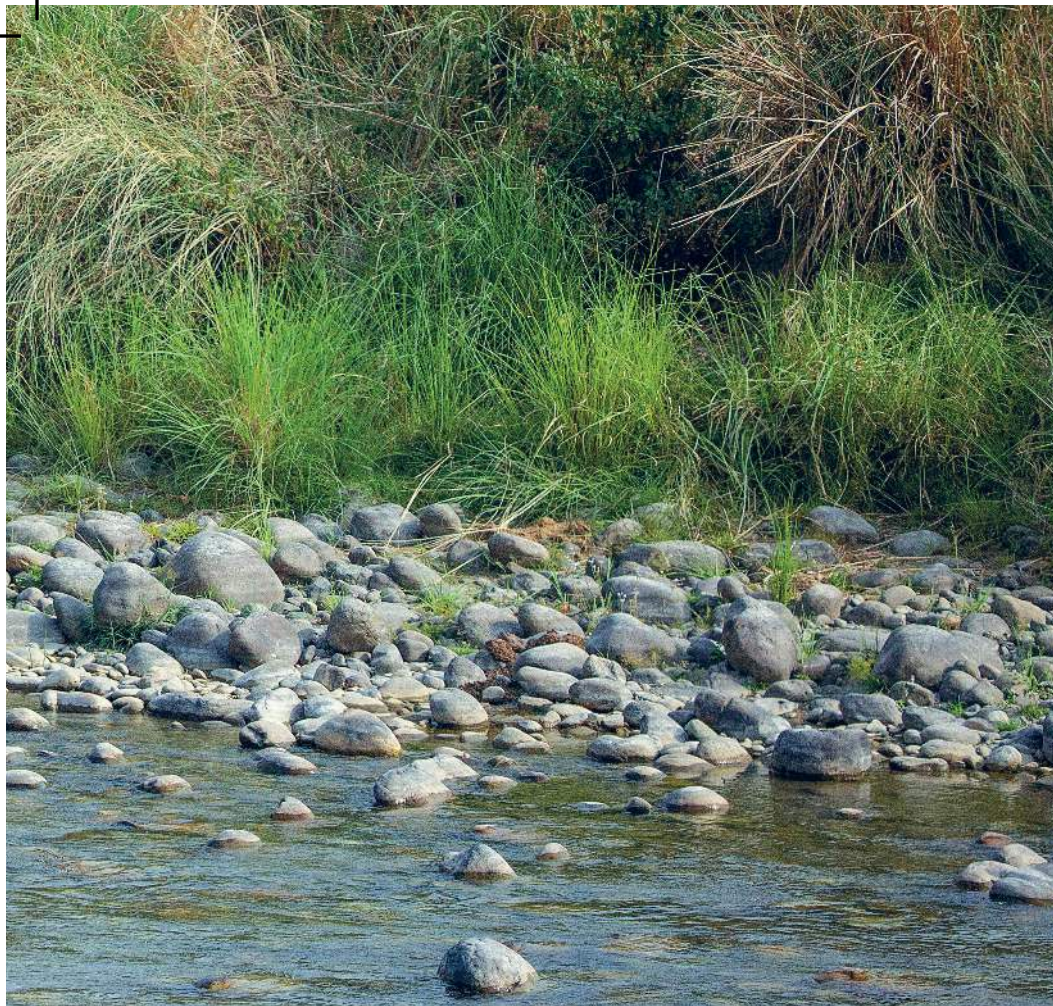


ABOVE The inherently graceful Paarwali crossing the Ramganga

Kankatti Junior was so named because of an identifying mark she obtained while play-fighting as a cub. In Hindi, 'kaan' means ear and 'katti' means cut. There was a big cut on her left ear so she became known as Kankatti. Junior was added to her name because there used to be an older tigress, in the same tiger reserve who was also called Kankatti, who had died while protecting her cubs from another

tiger. However, there are very few tigers with prominent scars and even fewer with uniqueness, so not many tigers are identified this way.

Names are also given on the basis of a tiger's territory. For example, Paar (meaning across) is an area across the Ramganga River in Dhikala, Corbett, and the tigress there is called Paarwali (meaning female from across the river). A dominant male in an area



called Rajbehra, in Bandhavgarh, is called Rajbehra Male.

Photographs taken by camera traps and tourists also help in identifying tigers. In some cases, tigers that were 'missing' are suddenly 'found' in photographs taken by visitors and shared on social media. Some tigers have been spotted in far-flung areas, away from where they grew up or were last seen. This also indicates the distance they had travelled. Jai, known

for his size and boldness, had walked roughly for 150km in search of new territory when he was three years old. It was only when he was captured in photographs that he was identified as Jai, and one of the identification marks was the scar on his nose. The cub I had seen in Nawegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserve had walked all the way to Umred-Pauni-Karhandla Wildlife Sanctuary as an adult, where he settled down.



Respect is a
two-way street!





R.E.S.P.E.C.T

I always thought that if a tiger came close, it would roar or snarl and that would be a frightening experience. When T17 came close to the jeep during my first trip to Ranthambhore, she did nothing of that sort but walked away, leaving me with a deep, abiding veneration for this regal animal.

It's not that tigers don't get disturbed or growl. I once saw a tiger walking along the side of a track where several vehicles were parked. He was just about to cross the track when a few excited visitors started talking loudly. The tiger stopped, bared his canines and let out a short but distinct hissing growl while giving a stern stare. There

was instant pin-drop silence and once it was quiet, he continued to cross the path and went his way.

I have seen that humans and vehicles do not bother tigers that have grown up in places where visitors are allowed. For example, Lightning has seen vehicles since the time her mother T19, aka Krishna, started taking her around the ever-popular Padam Talao of Zone 3 in Ranthambhore. So she is used to being around vehicles.

Wild animals do not attack unless they feel threatened, especially when they have young ones around. In the jungle, we must adhere to the rules of nature and be responsible tourists.

OPPOSITE Lightning ignores all the vehicles and admirers

There is a line one must not cross in the presence of wild animals. It is essential to restrain our enthusiasm and excitement when we see a tiger. Any unexpected movements, even simple things like suddenly stretching out your arms, sticking your legs out of the open jeep, or making too much noise can confuse an animal. One swipe from a tiger acting in self-defence or in irritation could result in a life-threatening injury.

A question that I am frequently asked is whether a tiger has ever charged at me or if I've seen a tiger charge at a person or a vehicle?

Panna is a picturesque tiger reserve in Madhya Pradesh, with the beautiful Ken River flowing through it, reflecting stunning shades of green. The forest is a mixture of dry, deciduous, and savannah, with Kardai trees dominating the wooded areas. We were out on a safari, and my vehicle reached a spot where a few others were already parked. A tigress was walking away. There was another vehicle on the left side, in front of us, that had maintained a distance but was closest to her. Suddenly, the tigress turned and gave a hard stare, which sent a shiver down my spine. The driver in front started to reverse, he was a young and inexperienced lad,

and got scared. In his nervousness, he could not take his eyes off the tigress and for a few moments, he just froze. The tigress started to jog towards the vehicle, while we watched from a distance. The guide of that vehicle was an experienced man and quickly directed the driver to reverse the vehicle and managed to move further away. The tigress stopped jogging, stood her ground, staring intently for some time, then turned and went into the woods. I am sure that this is one experience all those present there will never forget; especially the moment when the tigress narrowed her eyes and stared at us with dilated pupils. Her eyes were actually 'burning bright'. Even today, I can clearly remember the piercing stare from those amber-coloured pupils.

Another such occurrence was in Ranthambhore. As we entered through the gate of the tiger reserve on a cold winter morning, the driver pointed towards a male tiger – T42, aka Fateh. His ruff was so fluffy that it looked like a lion's mane and he had an attitude that suited only the king himself! By the time the light improved enough for photography, there were around six more vehicles in front of the tiger. He looked at all the vehicles in turn, as if he was highly intrigued by all of us,



ABOVE Out of my way: dilated pupils – this tigress is cranky

observing each and every movement. All of a sudden, his ears moved from side to side, one at a time, in alertness, while he glared at a man in a jeep. Then he abruptly rose and charged, stopping just about six feet away from the vehicle that the man was in. It was one of those moments when I could not lift the camera but just stared in astonishment.

I wondered why the tiger chose to charge at that particular man, especially when there were a few other vehicles closer to him? Later, when we were out of the jungle, I asked the guide if he knew the reason, and he answered that the man first used his camera flash several times while photographing the tiger. After that,

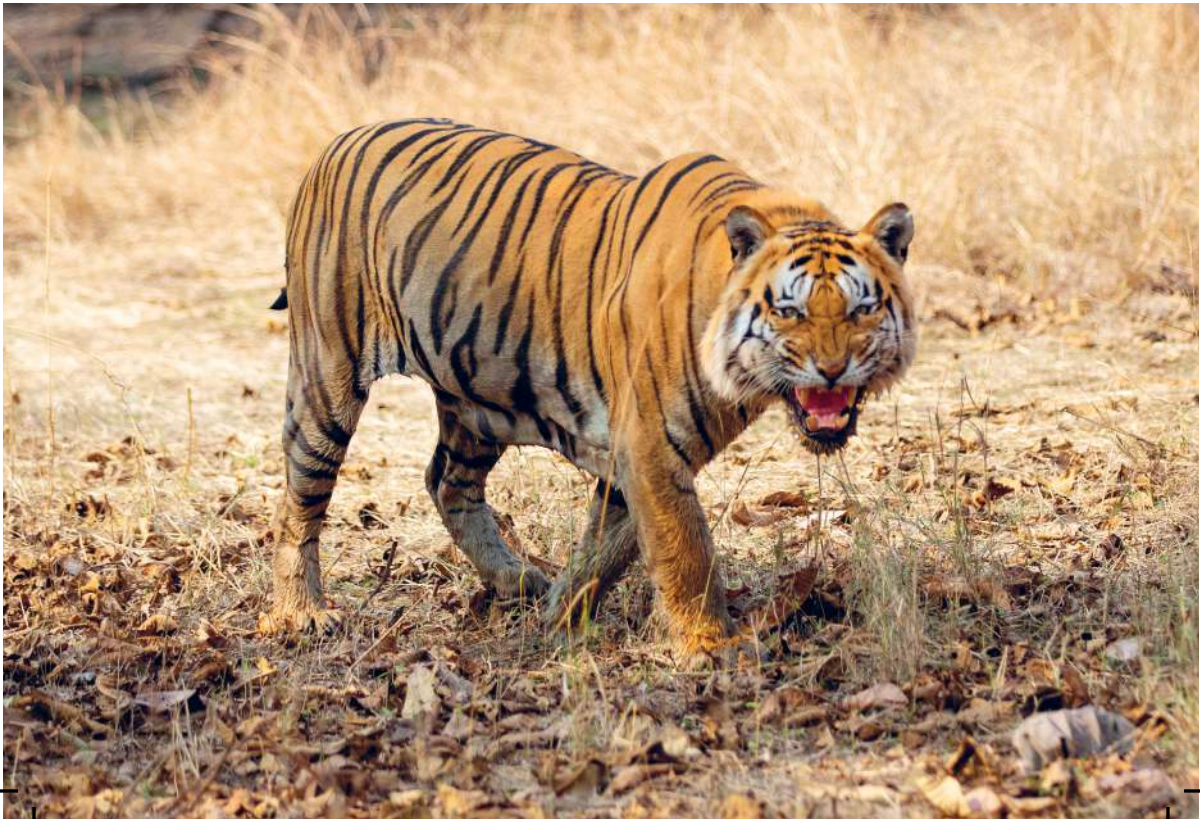
he decided to climb out of the vehicle before the guide scolded him and asked him to sit. Maybe the constant flashes and movement by that visitor disturbed the tiger, and he exhibited his annoyance. Visitors should never, ever behave like this in front of any animal, let alone a tiger in the wild.

Both the incidents were mock charges, meaning that the tigers just wanted to show their annoyance. In the second incident, the tiger mock charged for about twelve feet and stopped. However, he continued to stare intently at the man until the

upset guide and the driver decided to drive the visitor back to the hotel. Had it been a real charge, the tiger could have leaped and with little effort, he would have landed on the man.

There have been times where tigers have harmed humans. Every case is different from the other and to understand the reasons behind the attacks, we should study each case individually. There was a case of a dominant male tiger, T24 aka Ustaad, who was declared a man-eater after killing four people. He was at his prime in Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve when

BELOW We're in their home — respect their space





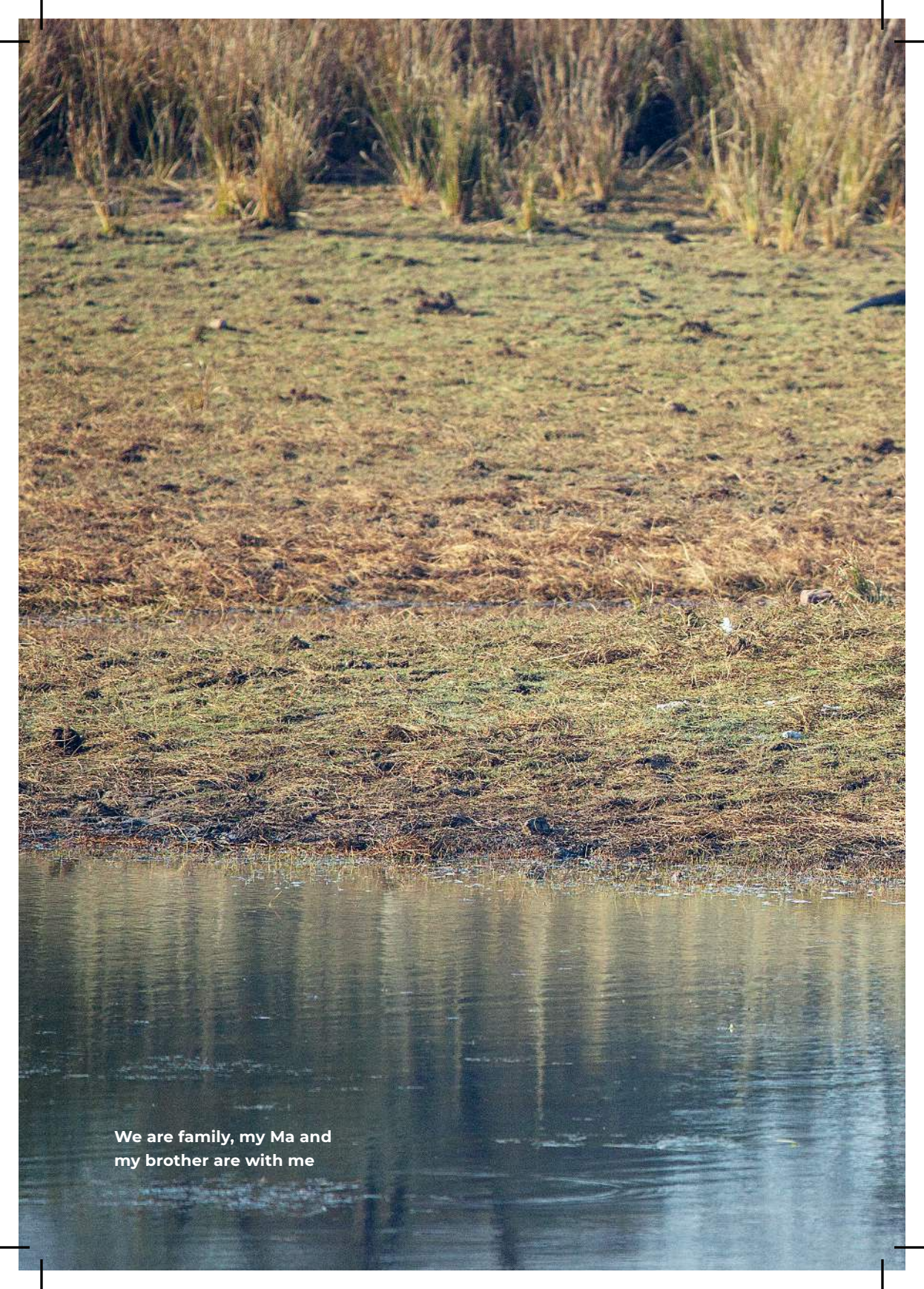
ABOVE Posing for the hoi polloi

he was sent away to a biological park. This became a controversial issue as wildlife lovers had different opinions on the subject.

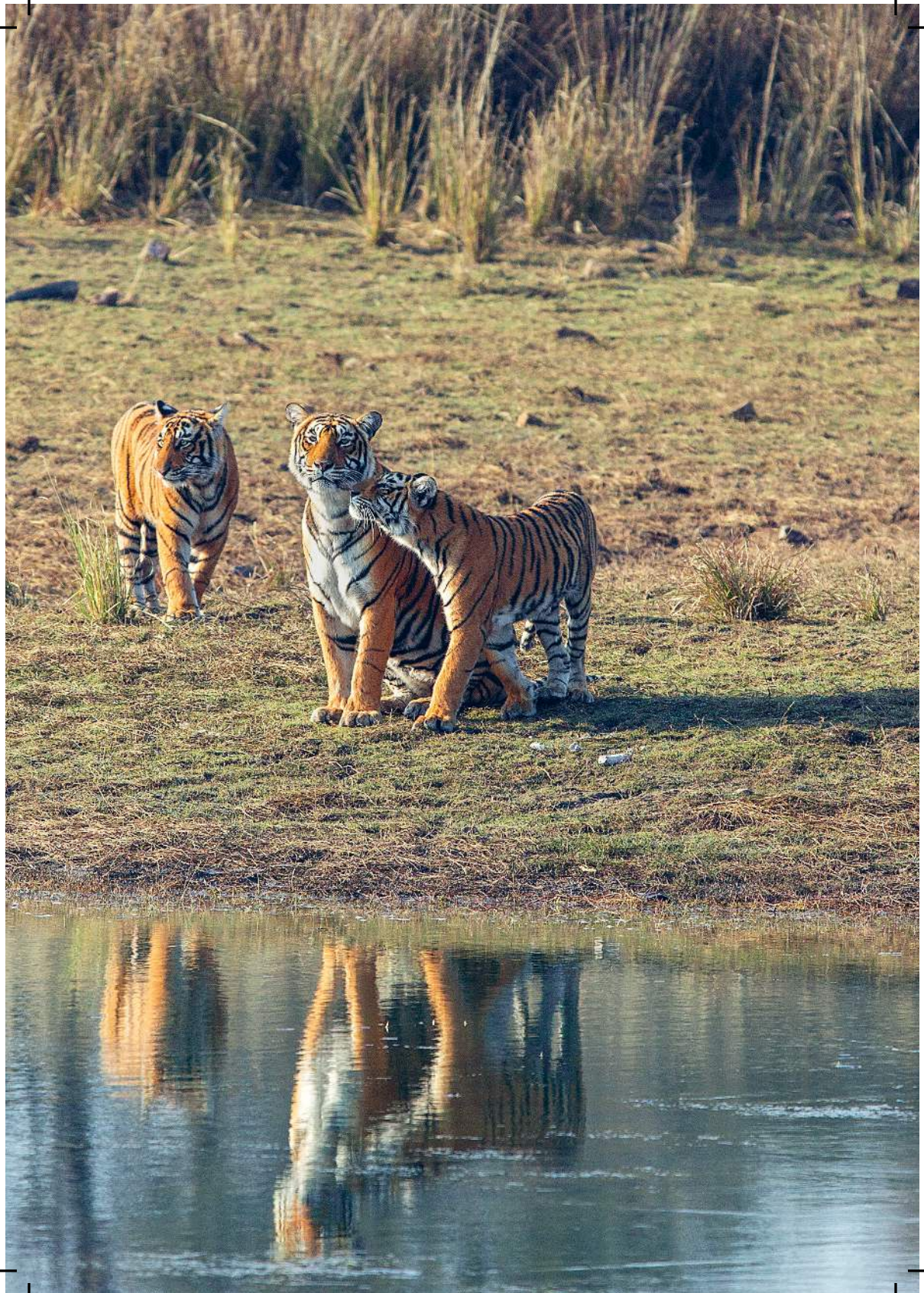
Tigers are territorial animals and are bound to venture into other places if they are ecologically trapped, meaning when the habitat and prey are not enough for survival. When their territory shrinks, their prey base also reduces, and the predators go to the periphery of the jungles, closer to human settlements, in search of easy kills like domestic animals. When tigers grow old or get seriously injured, they cannot hunt the usual cheetals and sambars which are fast, so they prey on domestic animals, which are slower

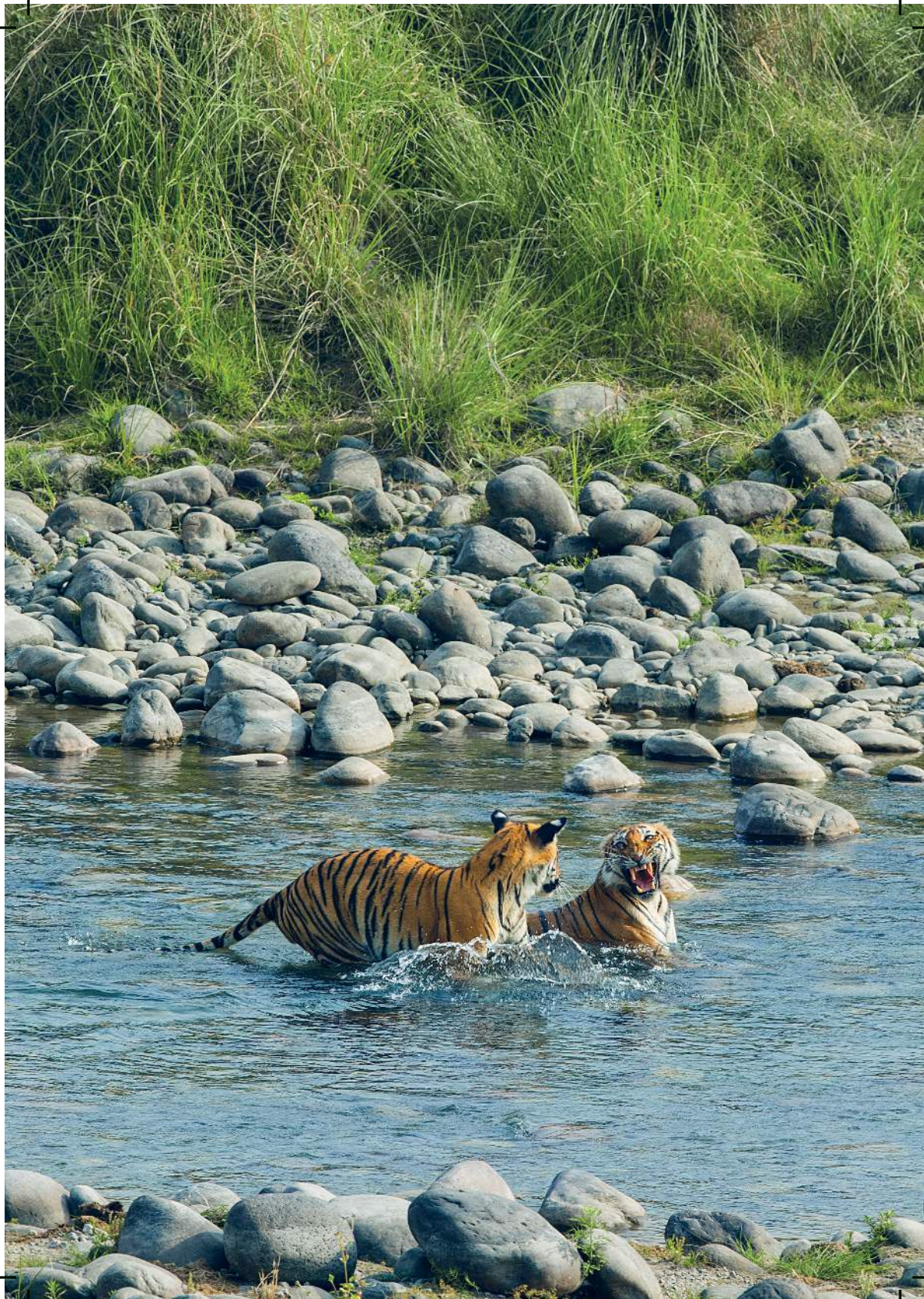
and often tied up. Attacks on humans are generally cases of mistaken identity. These happen especially when humans appear smaller, like while squatting or sitting down and tigers mistake them for smaller prey. In some cases, curiosity has killed or harmed humans. There have been instances when people came to know about a tiger in the vicinity, without giving it a thought, they went to check it out and were injured or killed by the tiger.

Tigers are afraid of us, just like we are afraid of them. They, too, do not know if we will attack them or not. If only they understood that we have harmed wildlife in so many ways, they REALLY would be afraid of us!



**We are family, my Ma and
my brother are with me**





MOTHERS!

Corbett Tiger Reserve is a veritable paradise, with vast grasslands full of tall, vibrant green grass and thick jungles with towering trees. Most of the trees there are sal and when the leaves fall on the forest floor, they form an endless carpet in every shade of rust and gold. As you travel from the main gate towards Dhikala, an area popular with wildlife lovers in India and abroad, you will drive under a canopy of trees that almost seems like a tunnel. The Forest Rest House, overlooking the Ramganga River, is 31km inside the forest, and guests can stay here after booking in advance.

One bright morning, as I was being driven for a safari, there were already several vehicles parked on the edge of the track on Sambar Road. As soon as my driver parked along the high bank at the river's edge, the tigress Paarwali and her male cub appeared from the tall elephant grass. Just before reaching the river, she started running and leaping. The cub tried to catch up by sprinting behind her. The cub was a single child so Paarwali was playing the part of a sibling. The tigress slowed down at the edge of the river and waded into the water to cool off. As she settled in, the cub came towards her and tried to nuzzle

OPPOSITE Cubs need to be disciplined too

her. She suddenly snarled and turned towards him. Now she was playing the part of a disciplinarian.

Since the cubs are the sole responsibility of the mother, she has to play different roles on different occasions. She is the protector, teacher, provider, caretaker and in case of single cubs, she is also the sibling and playmate. Being a parent is tough, being a single parent is tougher, but being a mother tigress is the toughest job. She has to look after her young, groom them, hunt for food, come back to feed the cubs, mark her territory to ward off intruders and teach the cubs the ways of tiger life. In addition, wild animals like leopards, wild dogs, hyenas, snakes and other tigers are known to kill cubs, so the mother has to be alert at all times to ensure the safety of her dependent cubs.

Mothers of young cubs are very cautious of sounds and movements. Once, I was being driven around from track to track, in search of a tiger and two tigresses, whose territories overlapped in a particular area in Ranthambhore. As the jeep turned a bend, we came face to face with a tigress lying flat on the ground, with only her head raised. Upon seeing the vehicle she wrinkled her nose, narrowed her eyes, and exposed her

canines before letting out a snarl. It was the first time I had heard a tiger snarl. Initially, I thought that she had been startled by our sudden arrival. Then, further away, I saw two bundles of striped fur rolling under a tree – two cubs, around three months old, were playing with each other. So the mother's snarl was a warning, telling us to keep a distance. Seeing us quiet and maintaining our position, the tigress relaxed. She put her head back on the ground and closed her eyes. Every now and then she would open her eyes for a few seconds to look at each one of us before shutting them

BELOW Little cat, major attitude





ABOVE Mum's the word

again. The cubs did not even glance at us and were busy frolicking, confident that they were in no danger with their mother around.

Just then, a slight movement, further ahead from where the tigress was laying, caught our attention and we realised that there was a third cub. It walked a bit closer, down a little slope, and stopped to look at us with its big, curious eyes. After watching us for a minute or two, it scrunched up its nose and hissed! It was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard. What an attitude! On reaching its mother's side, it possessively put a paw on her face. It felt like the cub was introducing his mother by gesturing,

“This is my Ma!”

Another time, on a hot day in Bandhavgarh, we followed a tigress walking to a waterhole. She sat in the water to cool down and lapped some up to quench her thirst. Within a few minutes, she got up and walked right back to where she had come from. The guide explained that she had given birth to three cubs around eight to ten weeks ago. Therefore, the reason for her hurrying back was to be with her young ones, as tigresses do not like to leave their cubs unattended for too long. I used to often wonder about the relationship between the cubs and their father. Does the father not play a role as a parent?



Special Bond

I got the answer to my question on the next trip to Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve. This famous tiger reserve has several zones, with different kinds of vegetation. Some areas have large clusters of bamboo and some have short, green shrubs. Then there are tall trees and grasslands in other places. The terrain varies too, from rocky hillocks to plain, flat grounds with tracks meandering in between the trees. A temple called Shesh Shaiya – Lord Vishnu sleeping on Shesh Naag, the seven-hooded serpent – is open to the public. This is one place where visitors can get down from the jeeps and stretch their legs. Another

area, called Sidhbaba, was the capital of the kingdom for the first family of tigers, B2 and his progenies. This tiger reserve is also close to my heart as it was here that I saw a tiger and tigress together for the first time, just as I had started my journey into the jungles nearly eight years ago. Moreover, I saw them mating once as well and then, after a gap of approximately eight months, I saw the cubs who were a result of those mating sessions.

The popularity of the zones in tiger reserves fluctuates according to tiger sightings. When there are cubs around, visitors have a better chance of seeing not only the parent and

OPPOSITE Grandson of B2, son of Bamera, with his son — daddy's tender moment



ABOVE Second thoughts about getting into the water again

cubs but also observe some amazing interactions between them. It was in Bandhavgarh, during the peak of summer in 2017, where I saw some extraordinary cub activities.

Three cubs were around a waterhole, lazily biting and clawing each other playfully. Upon asking, the guide said that the mother was away, most likely on a hunt. Suddenly, the stillness was disturbed by a flurry of action at the other end of the track. A cheetal gave a shrill alarm call. The alerted sambars raised their ears and tails and started thumping their hooves on the ground. A peafowl shrieked and flew right over my head. Even the cubs raised their heads

with ears upright. All were being told to be at attention for the arrival of the king of the jungle! A huge male tiger came striding out of the thickets. This was the father (who is one of the cubs who was the result of those mating sessions I saw during my first visit to Bandhavgarh, now a father himself) of the cubs. He went straight into the water and sat just below where the cubs were playing. The cubs stopped playing and were alert after the father's entry. As he settled comfortably in the water, one cub got up and went towards him. While standing at the edge of the waterhole, looking slightly uncertain, it slowly stretched its neck towards the father. The father

stretched forward and nuzzled the cub in return. It is one of the most endearing sights I have witnessed between a male tiger and his cub.

After undivided attention from the father, the cub went into the water. The other two cubs joined in and they started playing amongst themselves, while the father placidly watched over them. Soon, the tiger got out of the water and walked ahead, crossing the tracks. One by one, the cubs scurried after him. It was a rare sighting, where I saw the king act like any other tenderhearted parent. During that trip, I regularly saw the father with the cubs. On one occasion, the guide informed me that he even took them to feast on a sambar that he had hunted down.

Whenever I have seen cubs, I have seen them with their mothers. This was the only trip where I saw a father interacting with his cubs. The grooming and constant body contact that I have observed between mothers and cubs was missing here. However, to see the cubs continue doing what they were doing, before the father appeared, showed that they were comfortable around him. When all of them hurriedly followed the father, to me, it meant that the cubs must have been doing that regularly. This vivid memory has remained with me – I feel incredibly lucky to have seen a tender moment between a cub and his father, which is unusual in the wild with tigers!

BELOW Little legs can't keep up with Daddy





Cycle Of Life

On a morning safari in Ranthambhore in the month of April of 2015, the driver stopped the jeep on a slope in the territory of T19. Both the guide and driver were certain that T19 and her three cubs would be crossing the track soon. While waiting, I took some time to enjoy the surroundings. The forest looked even more beautiful in the early morning light. There was a huge banyan tree in front, with its branches spreading out in all directions as if reaching up to the sky, and tentacle-like roots dangling from the branches as if trying to stay rooted to the ground. Several birds were perched on the branches; some

preening, some trying to woo females by crooning repertoires of songs accompanied by a jig here and there, while others were busy eating insects and worms for breakfast.

Several thoughts were floating around in my head. How old was that banyan tree? How many seasons, storms, sunshine had it witnessed? How many tigers had that tree seen? Some tigers must have just wandered by, some must have taken refuge under it and some cubs must have even tried to climb it. Right then, as if my daydream had turned real, T19 appeared from behind the tree, with her three cubs in tow. As soon as

OPPOSITE "Lightning, listen to me, when we playfight we do not take out our claws"

they crossed the track and reached the grassland, the cubs began to play. They were running, chasing, pushing, climbing and toppling over each other – it was a sheer delight to watch these energetic cubs.

One of the cubs started showing off its expertise in climbing trees on the other side of the track. While standing on a branch it looked down, rather sheepishly, at the childish prancing of its siblings. Soon all the three cubs were ascending and descending trees, proving that tigers are indeed fond of climbing. They might as well do it to their heart's content at this age because once they get older and heavier, I'm sure they wouldn't be agile enough to climb trees as often as they would want to!

The other two siblings were in their element too, playfully showing off their skills. Baring their canines, they stood on their hind legs and swatted each other with their paws. Then they started playing catch-me-if-you-can around stalks of tall grass while turning around every now and then indulging in a bout of fisticuffs. One tried to hide behind a shrub and the other sneaked up from behind and pounced on the other. After all the chasing, boxing, biting and growling, the two went and sat in a pool of water.

A few months later, I saw the same cubs, now around sixteen months old and nearly as big as their mother. This was another fulfilling trip, full of amazing activities between the sub-adult cubs. When I first saw the sub-adults baring their teeth, snapping, biting and fisticuffing, it did not look playful at all but looked like a serious fight. After seeing that they were not hurting each other, I realised that these games are actually learning skills, essential for their survival later on in life. Their ability to hunt or fight for dominance is based on the practice they get as cubs. I am sure as time passes, the skills they learn in these playful fights are fine-tuned. The controlled soft nibbles as sub-adults become increasingly more aggressive as they grow. These spirited clashes then turn into serious brawls with siblings and even parents.

According to the guides, cubs generally become independent at the age of 24–30 months. Until then, they will be seen with their mother. They separate from each other once they can hunt on their own or when the mother is ready to mate again. Slowly but surely the cubs become big and strong and fend for themselves. Since tigers are territorial animals, once independent, they often go out in



ABOVE "Hey sisters, come let me show you girls how to climb a tree"

search of a territory or are driven out by the reigning tiger. In some cases, they fight for the territory they grew up in and become the new dominant tiger in the area. Occasionally, the one who lost and is without a territory might stay in the same vicinity for some time, avoiding the stronger sibling or the territory holder.

At other times, the grown-up cubs may have to travel far, due to insufficient space, until they find a place to call their own. These top predators are most vulnerable when they move out of protected forests. Till they find an ideal place to live, natural prey may not be readily available and they have to rely on small wild

or domestic animals. As villages are changing into town and town into cities, the number of small prey has rapidly decreased. I can say from my own experience that the places where towns and cities have expanded, even the availability of domestic animals has drastically decreased. Just six years ago, I used to frequent an area on the outskirts of Delhi in search of leopards, which was also home to jackals, rabbits and birds like Egyptian vultures and Indian eagle owls. The villagers told stories about the caves around the rocks and boulders where leopards lived and raised their young. These predators, every once in a while, would snatch domestic animals

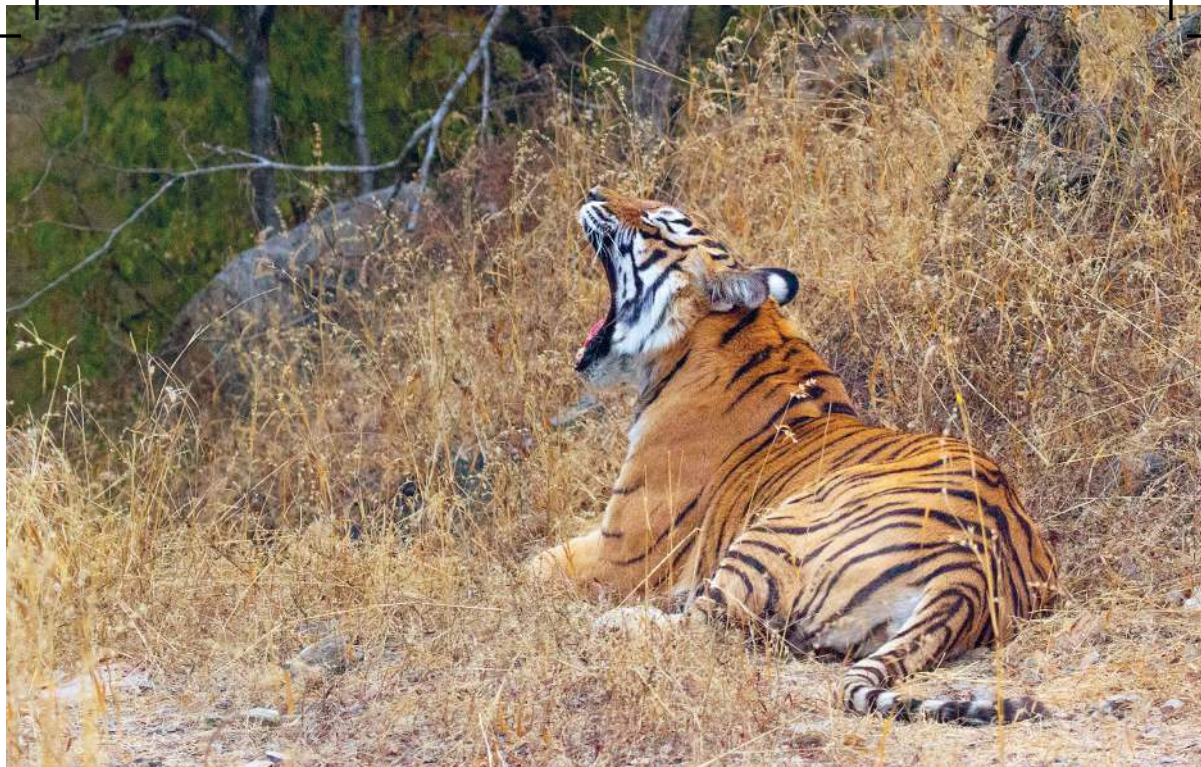
from the village. Eventually, all the boulders and rocks were levelled to the ground to build huge apartments. A few of the wandering leopards now do not even have those sources of food like stray dogs and domestic animals. In the same way, the food source for these translocating tigers, just like the leopards, has shrunk over time. Therefore, you may have read and heard about these carnivores sometimes meeting an early death, if not due to human-animal conflicts, then due to starvation.

Ageing tigers share a similar fate, as they are unable to hold on to their territory. India's most famous tigress, Machhli of Ranthambhore, lived for 19 years. She was one of the most bold and feisty tigresses, who was known to have fought and killed a huge crocodile. She was filmed and photographed warding off female opponents and fighting male tigers to protect her cubs. By the time she was 18 years old, she had lost all her canine and incisors. Towards the end of her life, she had started living on the fringe of the jungle, just outside a village. She chose the place, as it was easier to prey on domesticated goats, cows and pigs.

Jungle law mandates survival of the fittest, so the weak get overthrown and the strong take over. As age catches

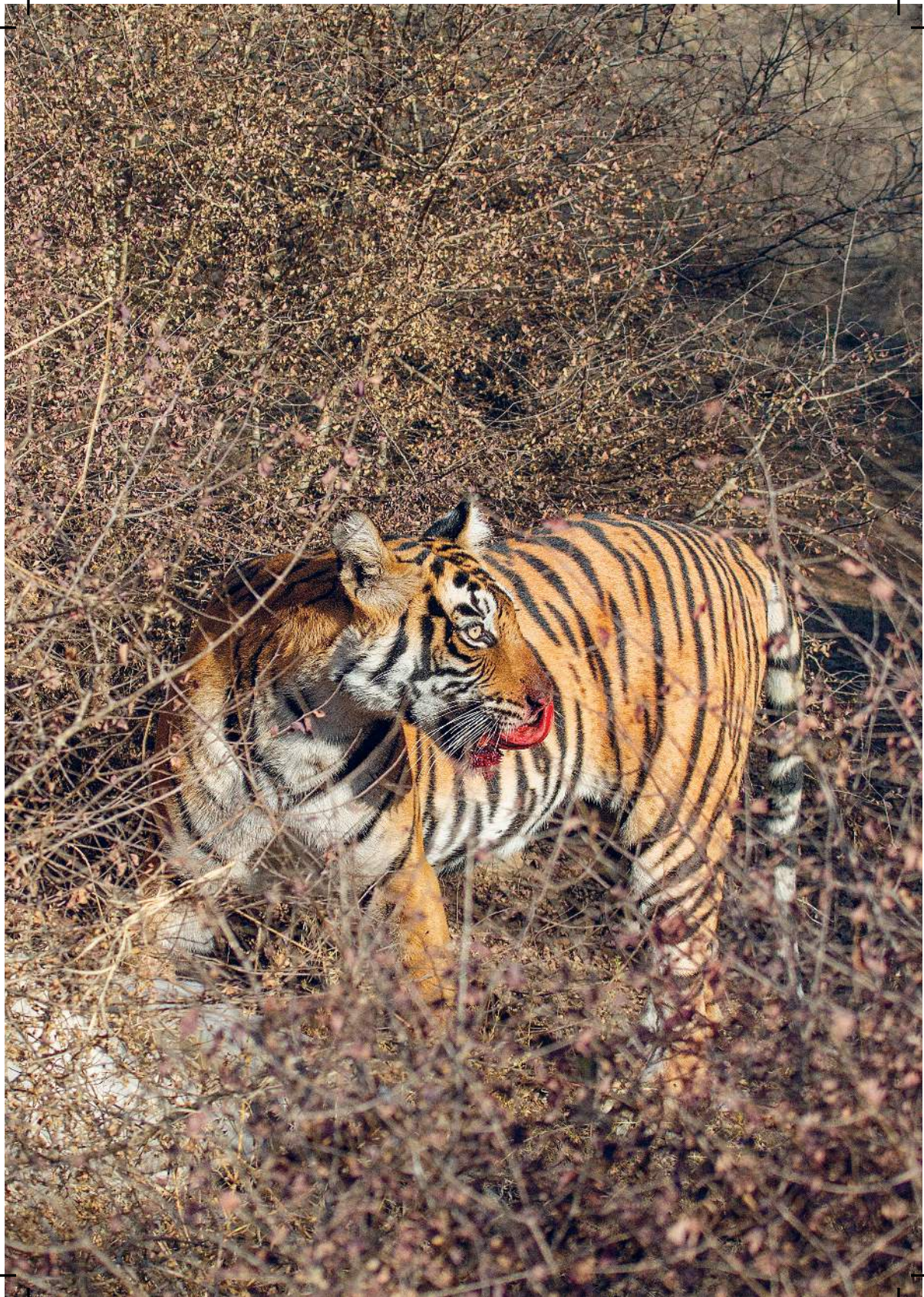
up, the weaker is generally the parent, who has to go out in search of new territory. During my first trip to Bijrani, Corbett Tiger Reserve, I had seen the dominant female called Sharmili. To me, she is the most beautiful tigress ever, with stunning, blazing eyes! She had four cubs in her last litter, two males and two females. She is now around twelve or thirteen years old and the huge territory over which she once reigned has been taken over by two young tigresses, one of them her own daughter from the last litter. When I last saw her, she still walked regally, her head held high, sniffing the air for signs of other tigers. She was also marking the area by spraying and raking, but she didn't have the same confidence she had three years back. She was staying in areas she considered safe, around the periphery of the territory she once reigned. She had lost some of her canines and a fight could be fatal for her, so she was avoiding confrontation of any kind.

Stronger tigers who win territorial fights may also sustain injuries, and in some cases, they can be extensive. Even for tigers in their prime, fights can be fatal. Despite undergoing hormonal surges for territorial dominance, tigers are still known to be sensible enough to avoid each other rather than fight.



ABOVE Machhli — when she had lost all her canines and incisors
BELOW The one with the blazing eyes, Grand Lady of Bijrani, spray marking





Keto Diet!

Tigers are nocturnal, but they are most active at dawn and dusk. It is also when other animals come to quench their thirst at water bodies, as well as the best time to observe tiger activities. On a late afternoon safari in Ranthambhore, we were following the pugmarks of a tigress. The guide told the driver to park the jeep at the edge of the lake. Even before the vehicle was properly parked, we saw a tigress walking towards the lake. She stood afar and watched the cheetals and sambars drinking water. In that instant, it looked like she was getting ready for a hunt.

Without taking her eyes off the

array of mammals in the lake, she cautiously moved closer. She then sat patiently, still intently watching the animals. After observing them a little longer, she slowly stood up, stretched her neck, pointed her nose forward and bent her legs at the joints with her belly almost touching the ground – crouching, making herself look small. Still crouching, she carefully walked towards the lake. Every now and then, she would raise a front leg and the opposite hind leg and wait for a few seconds before putting them down, slowly moving ahead. Puffs of dust rose as she placed the soft padded soles of her paws, one by one, firmly on

OPPOSITE Tigers: they're all about the protein

the ground, without making a sound.

The tigress came up right next to a jeep parked at the edge of the lake and stretched her neck to peek at the unassuming herds of herbivores. She was taking advantage of the parked vehicle as her crouching body was now completely hidden from the clueless mammals in the water. She selected a target – the one who was the closest and smallest. The concentration was evident, not for a moment did she look at the approaching vehicles, not for a

second did her eyes wander from the target. Except for the ears, not a single muscle moved as she waited.

When she intuitively felt that the particular cheetal was within reach, she made her final move. She sprang, landing around six feet away from where she had been crouching and then raced at top speed, covering around thirty feet in a few seconds. That was when the other animals noticed her presence and proximity, which sent them scurrying in all directions. The

BELOW Crouching tigress, Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve





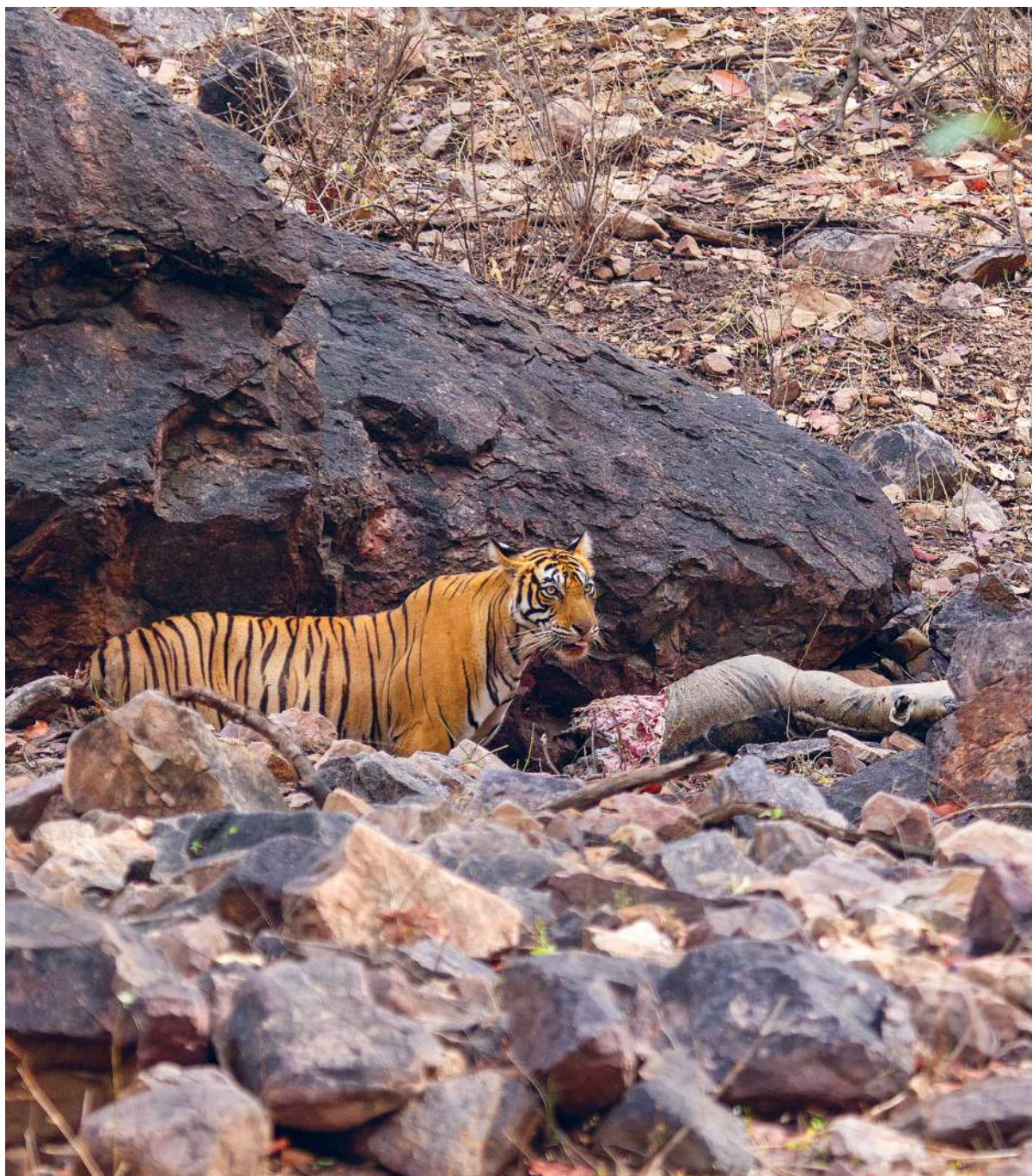
ABOVE Unsupervised hunts make sub-adult tigers more independent

atmosphere of the jungle was intense, and alarm calls were sounding all over. Those in the lake were splashing frenziedly, trying their best to get as far as they could from the tigress. Those on dry ground were frantically running helter-skelter, making the dust rise everywhere. The visitors in the vehicles, who at one point had been talking unconcernedly, were rendered speechless and motionless. With hearts pounding, everyone watched this rare event unfold in front of their eyes.

Though the cheetah managed to

reach the edge of the lake, it was too late. The struggle was short and after the dust settled down, I could see that the tigress had caught the cheetah by the throat. She then sat down with one paw on top of the cheetah's body and her jaw still firmly clasped on its neck until it went limp. Then, still holding it by the neck, she stood up and turned away from the spellbound watchers, dragging her kill further into the jungle.

On another safari, my jeep was parked at the edge of a track, where three hungry looking sub-adult cubs



– Lightning, Pacman and Arrowhead, were visible. As sub-adults, they had occasionally participated in hunts along with their mother but had not yet hunted on their own. According to the guide, the mother had been spotted the previous morning, going towards the hillocks deeper into the jungle, most likely to hunt. She had not returned since then. The cubs wandered aimlessly for some time when one of the cubs, Lightning, came and sat in front of our parked jeep. Suddenly, one cheetal gave a shrill alarm call. A fawn, next to it, was so startled by the call that it ran. As luck would have it, it ran straight towards Lightning. The fawn was so bewildered to see the tigress in front that for a moment it just froze and stood still. Lightning seized the opportunity and with claws out, she stretched her right paw and grabbed it. Then using both her paws, she pulled the fawn towards her. It was the first successful solo hunt by this young tigress.

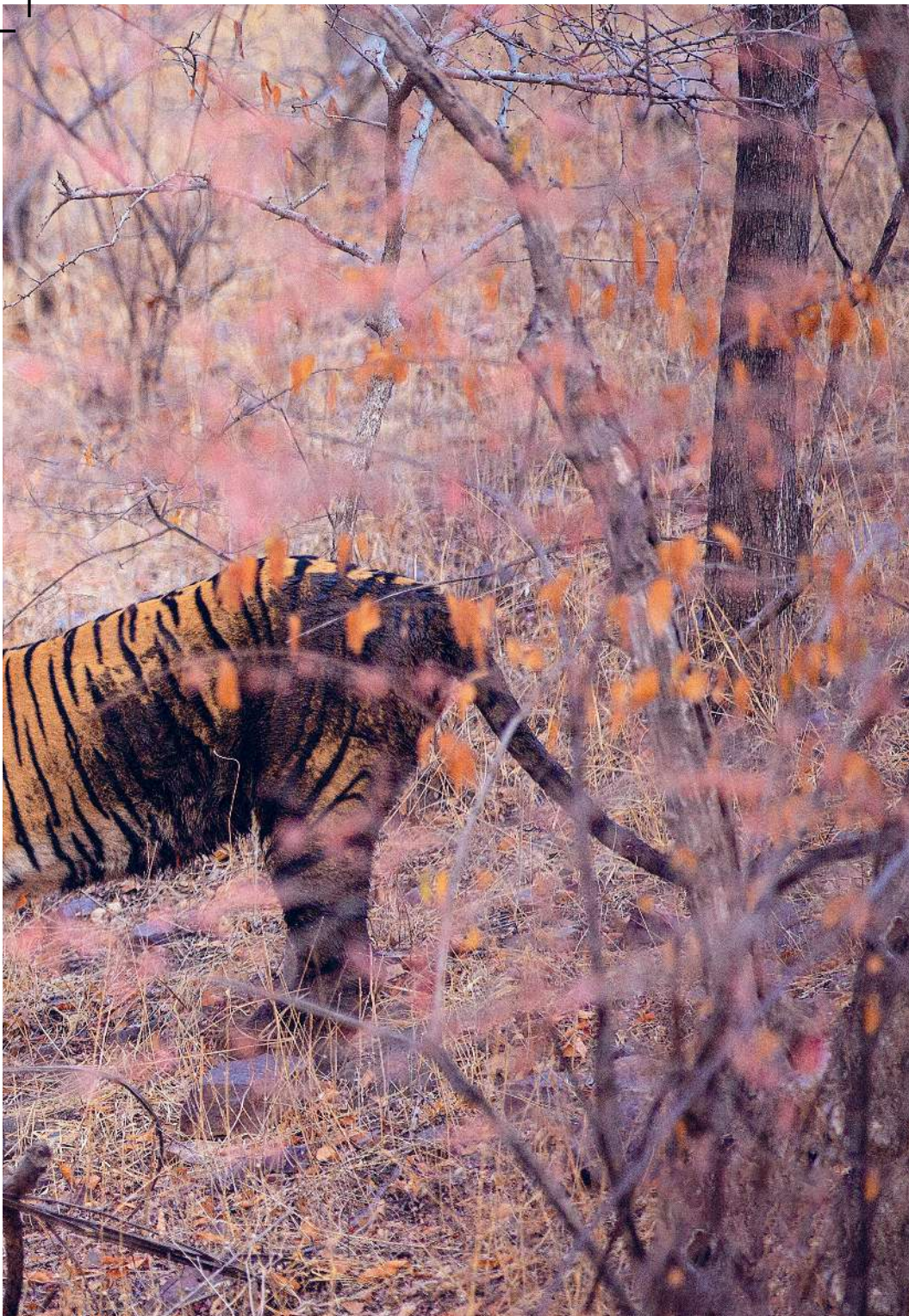
Yet another time when I was in Ranthambhore, it was the peak of summer, and the fallen leaves were in hues of amber and red. The jeep advanced towards a dead-end near a waterhole and a tigress T39, was

resting on a thick carpet of leaves. After a while, she got up and walked over and started pulling at something under the leaves. When she finally dragged it out, I could see that it was a *nilgai*, which she must have killed earlier. She had hidden the kill under the pile of leaves. After feeding on it, she dragged the remaining carcass between some rocks. Then, she raked the leaves from the ground and covered it up again, trying to hide it from the crows and vultures that had already started to flock around.

Tigers are not successful in every hunt they attempt. They have to try several times before they succeed. I have seen more failed hunts than successful ones and young tigers, who are inexperienced and have less patience, fail more often than they succeed. A mother feeding her cubs has to hunt more often. If the kill is huge and there is no one to share it with, they store it for later. Tigers are good at hiding leftovers, which they consume later. In addition, tigers expend a lot of energy during hunts. With all the unsuccessful attempts, when they finally make a kill, they need to protect it from the other carnivores and scavengers of the forest.

Lightning couldn't hold onto the kill for long, apparently, her brother, Pacman snatched the sambar from her







Need, Not Greed

From fiction, television shows and movies, we may be forgiven for our perception that predators like tigers will attack a prey whether hungry or not. I used to think so too, but the events that unfolded in front of me on two different occasions have made me believe otherwise. On our way to Rajbehra area, in Tala Zone of Bandhavgarh, the guide informed us that Rajbehra Female had killed a nilgai and some visitors had seen her taking the cubs to feed on it in the morning. Since it was late afternoon, we thought it was a good idea to wait for her at the only waterhole nearby. In the jungle, if anything pays, it

is patience. So, thinking we were in for the long haul, I made myself comfortable on the jeep's floor and we all waited for her in silence.

Finally, she arrived, emerging from the dense forest cover into the open grassland. From afar, I could see several cheetals grazing in the grassland. They became alert and it looked like they were ready to run. She did not even glance at them, just carried on walking straight to the waterhole. The cheetals remained alert and once the tigress had crossed them, they went back to grazing. Not a single cheetal ran or gave an alarm call! This made me understand that tigers do not kill

OPPOSITE An uninterested big cat walks amongst deer



ABOVE Not hungry, thanks, just here for the water

unnecessarily or instinctively, just because they see prey. They kill when they are hungry and when they have cubs to feed. In this case, though she had three dependent cubs, she had enough to feed them for a day or two, so it was neither necessary nor did she want to waste energy trying.

I witnessed another incident in Panna Tiger Reserve that further increased my respect for these predators. Poaching was so widespread there that the entire tiger population had been decimated. In 2009, two tigresses, one each from Kanha and Bandhavgarh and a tiger from

Pench were radio-collared and taken there. Since then, the tiger population has been steadily rising and it can be seen as a success story of the translocation of tigers in India. During my first visit to Panna in 2015, I was lucky to see a mother and her three cubs. The cubs were the third litter of one of the translocated tigresses, T1, to be born there and were quite bold, and could often be seen wandering and lazing around.

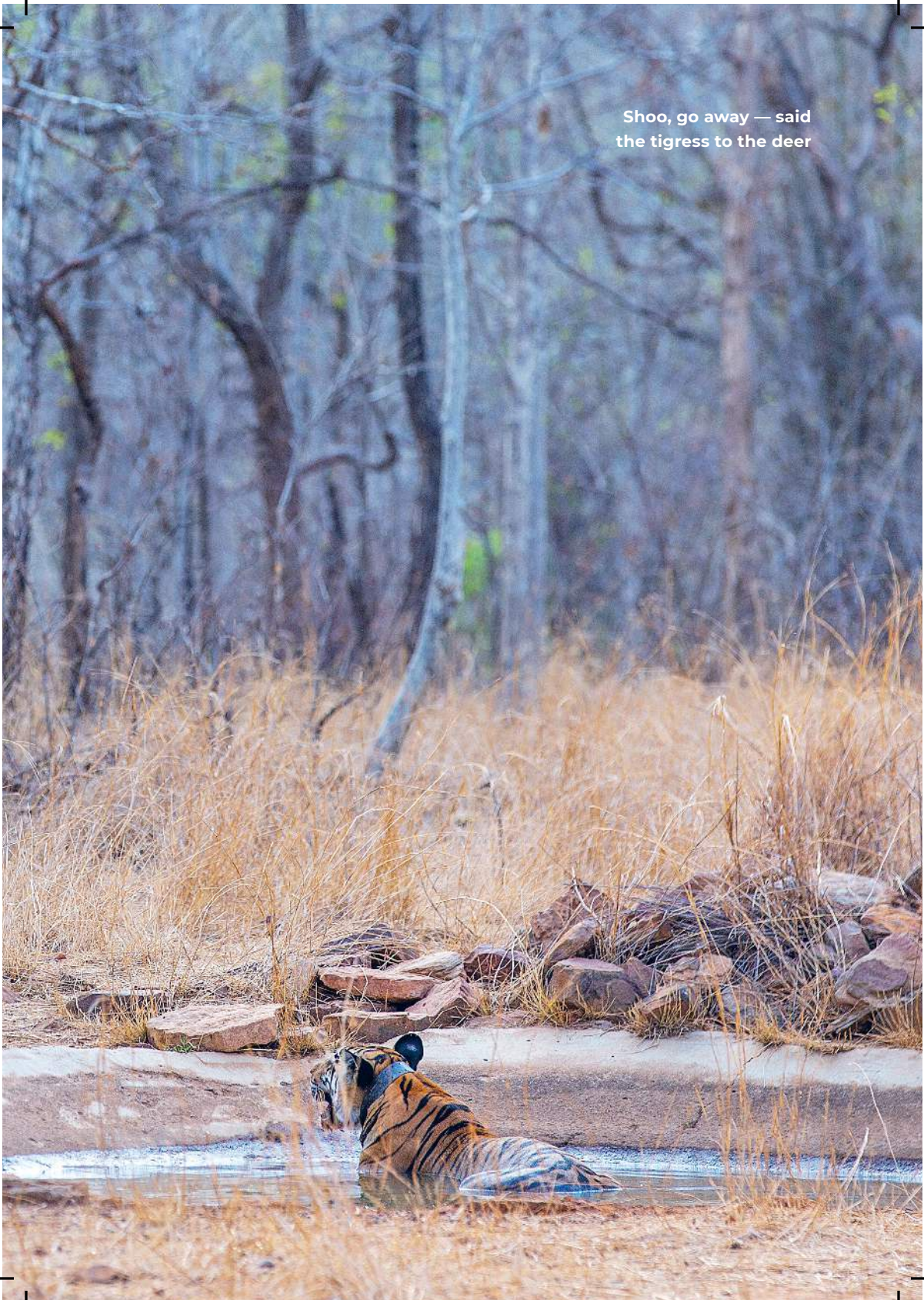
On another trip in June 2018, during the peak of summers, the tiger reserve was buzzing with happy news. The tigress T141, born in Panna to the translocated tigress T1, had recently become a mother. Last time when I saw T141, she was just a cub but now she was all grown up and radio-collared. The drivers and guides of the park were more or less familiar with her routine movements. She would normally hunt or mark territory during the night and by early morning would reach a particular waterhole. She would drink and rest for a while in that waterhole, before going back to the cubs that she had safely left in the caves at a gorge. As we were driving uphill towards the area, I was even more eager to see the cub that I had left behind, who was now herself a mother.

It was a sweltering morning and we

waited near the waterhole. After about twenty minutes, the collared young tigress appeared. Without looking around, she boldly went and sat in the water. After settling down comfortably and lapping up some water, she suddenly raised her head and her ears twitched in alertness. She abruptly stood up, placed one paw on the edge of the waterhole and crouched, as if ready to spring into action. I, too, looked where the tigress was gazing intently and noticed two cheetals were approaching the waterhole. The thirsty cheetals became aware of the tigress's presence and stood still right in front of her. My heart was pounding and the "will she – will she not" thoughts were racing through my mind! The tigress kept staring at them for a full two minutes, then turned her head sideways and sat back in the water. Sensing no conflict, the cheetals stood there for few more minutes and calmly walked away. A few minutes later, two sambars came by. The tigress gave them a fleeting glance and turned back to drink more water. The sambars, too, stood there for some time and eventually wandered off. Even a tigress, who was nursing and would need more food since she had dependent cubs, did not kill when opportunities presented themselves.



Shoo, go away — said
the tigress to the deer





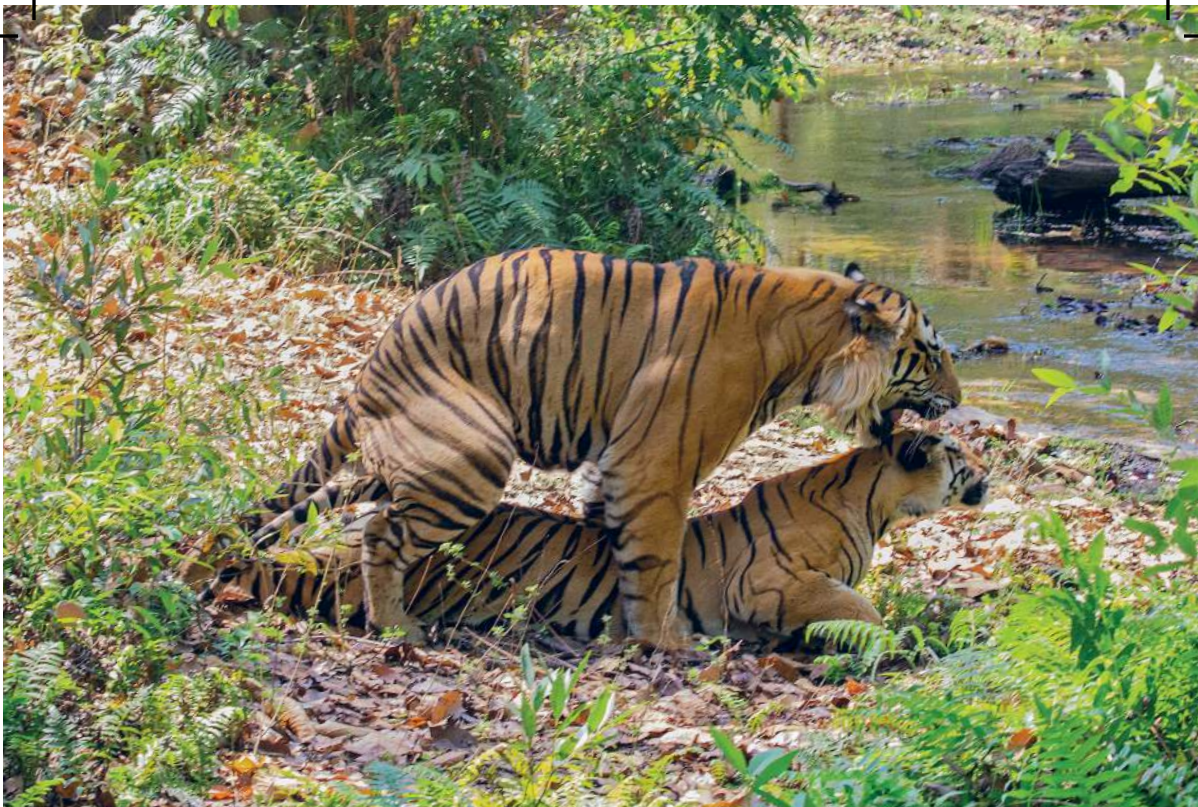
Tiger Talk!

How do male and female tigers communicate? How do cubs know when to follow their parents? How does a mother let her cubs know that it's safe to follow her? These are some of the questions that I've thought about regarding communication between tigers.

One time in 2011, while waiting outside the gates of Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve, we were thrilled to hear loud roars in the early hours of the morning. Since the roars were frequent and short, there was a fair chance that the sounds were being made by tigers mating close by. The driver knew exactly where to go and

when we reached the area, we saw a tigress sitting on a slightly elevated ground. A shrub was between us, so I could only see a part of her face but not her eyes. Just then, she lowered her head and looked straight at me, from in between the leaves. I immediately recognised her. It was admirable that the tigress Kankatti was doing so well, considering that she had lost an eye while fighting another female for territory. Our eye contact was broken when a loud and unusual sound boomed across, which sounded something like 'Aum-aum.' Looking for where it came from, I saw a tiger walking towards the tigress. He was

OPPOSITE Tiger meet-cute



ABOVE Bamera and Kankatti mating

massive, with his belly almost touching the ground. His head was huge and the ruff around his cheeks made it look even bigger. He was Bamera, the most handsome tiger I have ever seen. The guide explained that the sound he was making was a mating call.

Bamera stopped calling once he had Kankatti's attention and decided to sit under a tree, below the elevated ground. The tigress got up and went to him. She brushed him with her tail while walking past him, and then rubbed her cheek and neck on his forehead. She moved further away from him, to a shallow waterbody and

turned onto her back. She moved from side to side, rubbing her back on the ground with paws up in the air. Then she rested on her belly as Bamera came over and mounted her. There was a loud roar from the tigress and the tiger jumped off, hurriedly going back to sit under the tree. For the next three days that we were there, we heard them mating several times a day.

Something similar to the mating call, but much louder, is the 'dominance call', which can be heard from afar. It is the dominant male saying loud and clear that he is the king of the jungle. Tigresses, too, make

dominance calls but the duration, intensity and frequency are shorter than that of a male's.

During my first visit to Pench Tiger Reserve in 2015, my driver decided to show me around. Except for a few birds, nothing exciting was happening. As we approached a waterhole, the driver calmly said, "BMW is sitting in the water." BMW is a handsome male tiger who, according to rumour, rarely makes eye contact with visitors. After cooling down, he came out of the water and strolled towards us. While

crossing the vehicle track, he began a series of loud and long roars. Even though I could not see him after he entered the thick forest, the roars were still resounding and felt like they were coming from the core of the earth. From the intensity, it was clear that they were dominance calls. As we were still waiting and listening, the driver narrated an incident. A woman was visiting the jungle for the first time when she saw the massive tiger, Raiyakassa, giving loud dominance roars, she was so scared that she

BELOW BMW patrolling his territory



pleaded with folded hands for the driver to take her back to the hotel. However, to me, it was a song that touched my heart, so I guess it's like the saying – what is noise for some, is music to others.

As I started to frequent tiger reserves, I noticed that tigers make different calls for different purposes. A mother tigress makes a hissing snarl to discipline her cubs. But she makes a shorter and softer growl to stop a cub from whatever it is doing or if it is venturing away from her watchful eyes or comfort zone.

Once in Ranthambhore, I was waiting for cubs to come out. The tall grass was swaying in rhythm to the gentle breeze blowing across the meadows. Just then, at the edge of the grassland, the grass violently shook as though something was happening in there. I saw the head of a cub come peeking out with another one in tow. The one in front walked cautiously, looking ahead as if spellbound by something. Then it started jogging towards the lake, looking all fluffy. I was focusing on the cub when suddenly the mother gave a short but distinct growl. Even though the cub had lifted one of its legs to step forward, it immediately stopped in its tracks. With the leg still up and not moving even an

inch forward, it stretched its neck and continued to intently gaze at something further ahead. On hearing a splash in the water, I realised that the cub had seen a crocodile and was running towards it out of curiosity. It is in the genes, after all, that cub was Machhli's grandchild – Machhli, the famous crocodile slayer! Dependent cubs are very obedient and will immediately stop when they hear the mother's call.

I was lucky to see four tigers on two safaris in the same day, again in Ranthambhore, which gave me some wonderful opportunities to observe the mother and her three cubs' behaviour. After running around, while the mom was resting, two cubs went and lay down. The third was still restless and playful. She tried to bite her sister and then went climbing on her brother's back, who was resting near the lake. None of the siblings reacted, so she went to try and get the mother's attention. The cub rubbed her forehead against the mother's chin, wanting to be licked and groomed. The mother obliged a few times but eventually got annoyed. She snarled, lifted her paw and gave the cub a smack. Instantly, the cub moved away and after sitting down a little further away, she started licking and grooming herself like a good girl.



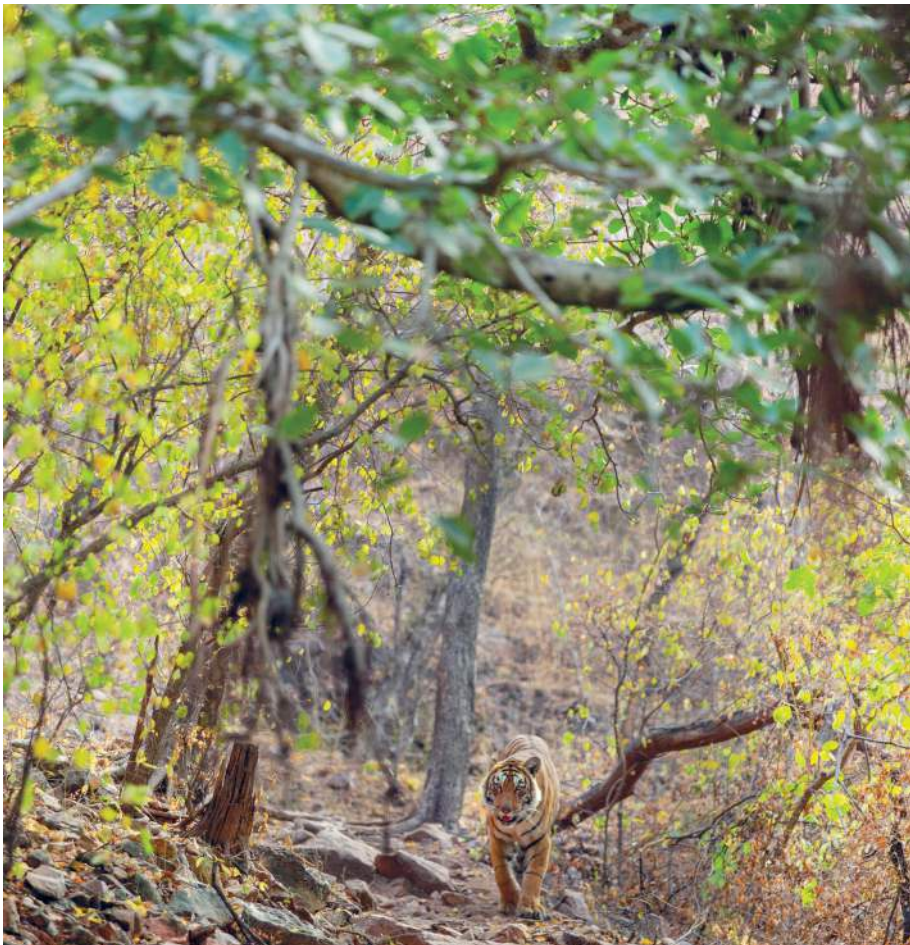
ABOVE A curious cub stopping in his tracks after the mother's call
BELOW T19 grooming her attention-seeking cub, Arrowhead



Another instance when I witnessed a mother's wrath was on a cold misty morning near Padam Talao in Ranthambhore. T19 and her three cubs – Arrowhead, Lightning and Pacman – were supposed to be in the area of our allotted zone for the morning safari. After reaching

the place, I requested the driver to park the vehicle in front of a majestic banyan tree. The straight lines of the sun's rays were shining through the gaps in the thick canopy. The leaves on top were glistening in the morning sunlight, which had tinged them in shades of gold. The trunk had many

BELOW Ranthambhore is dotted with banyan trees

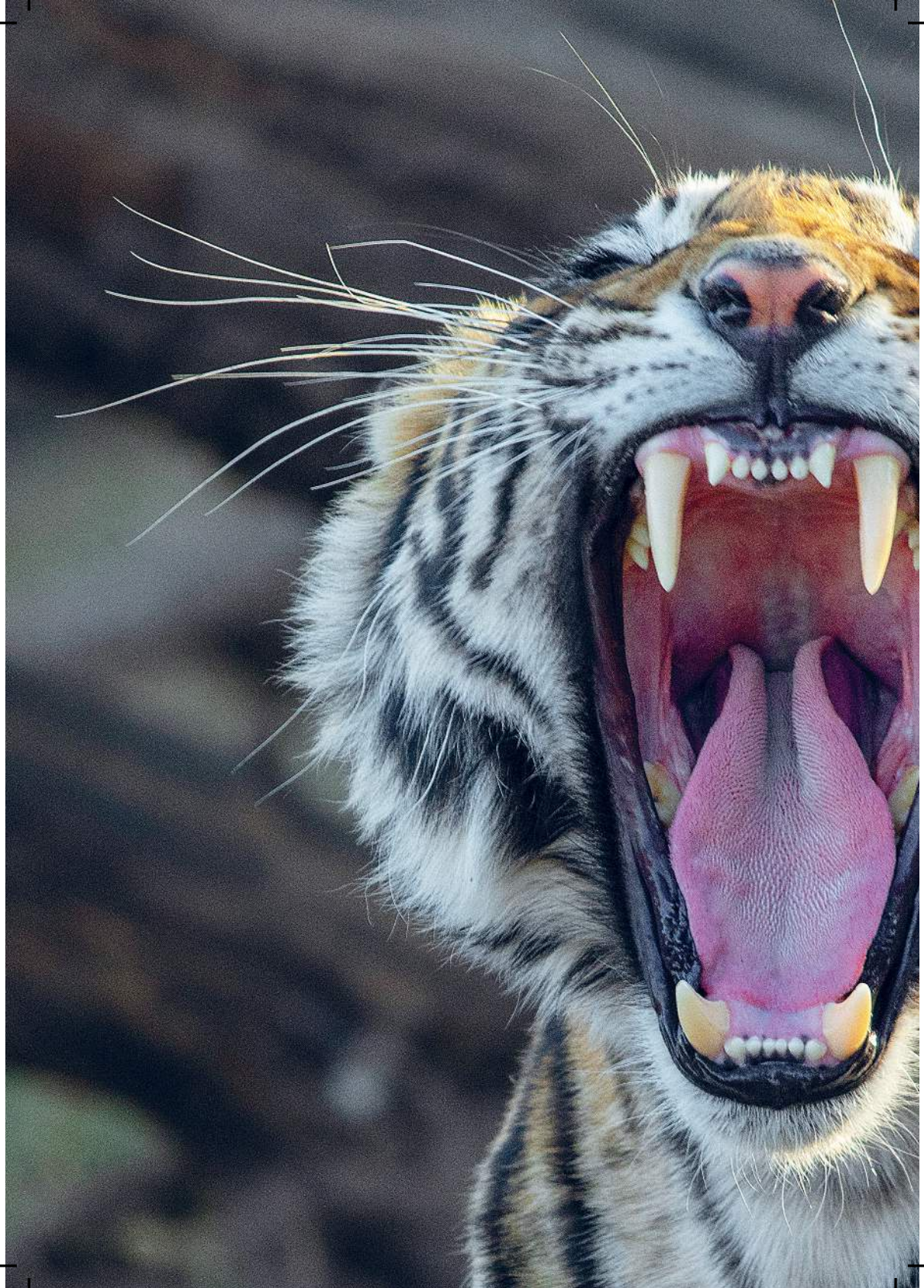


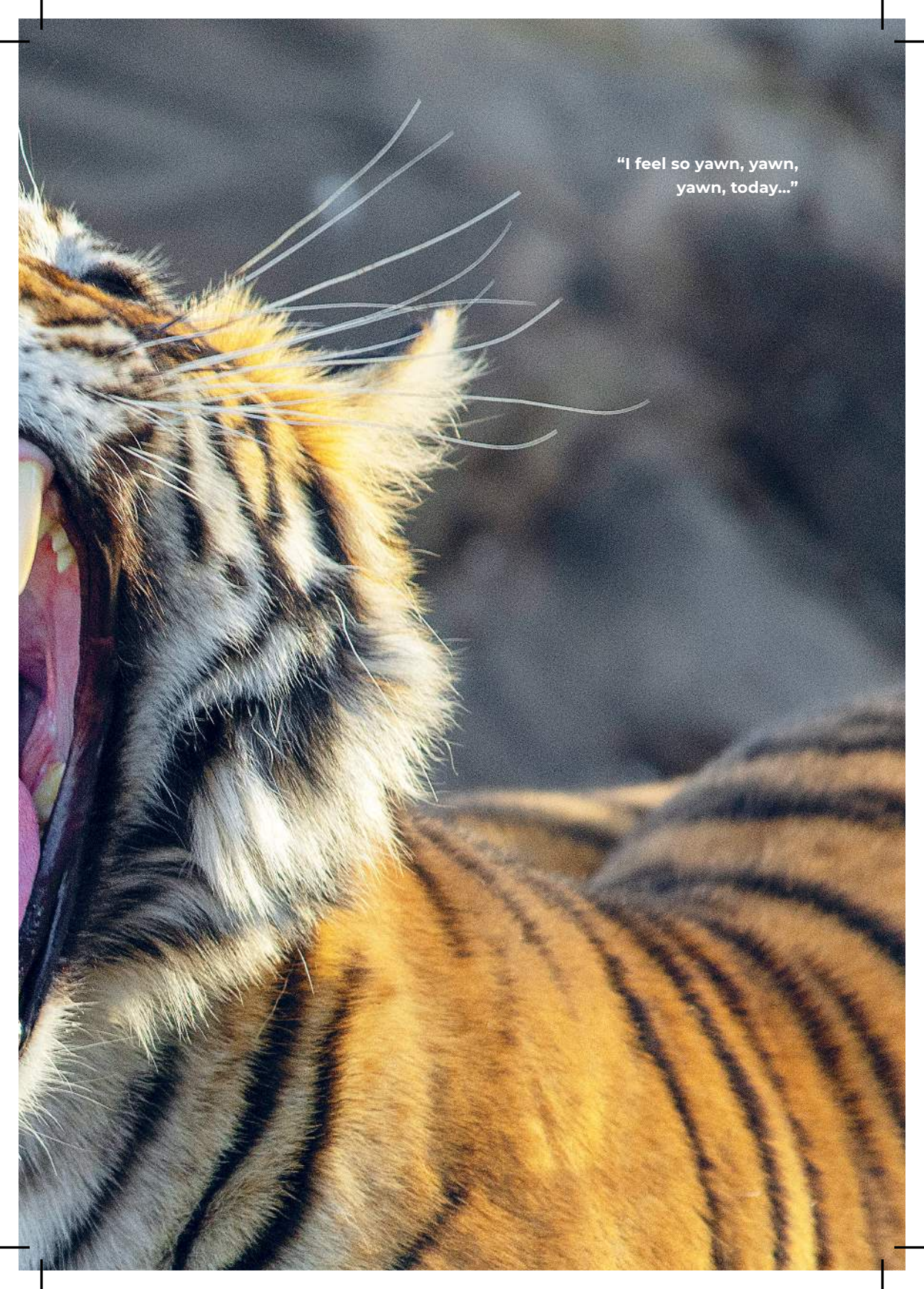


ABOVE T19 disciplining an overly affectionate Arrowhead

ridges, making it look like several pillars rising to support each other. From the side of the huge trunk, the tigress and her cubs emerged. After walking under the tree, they crossed the track into the grassland. The most attention-seeking cub, Arrowhead, was constantly nuzzling her mom. T19 lost her patience, paused, turned her head towards the cub and snarled while baring her teeth. The cub instantly stopped walking and laid down flat on the ground, in total submission. After giving a long stern look and still baring her canines, the mother walked away. Arrowhead lay there for a little longer and then followed the mother, maintaining a safe distance.

On another occasion, we were watching the three cubs of T9, aka Darrah Female, in Ranthambhore. The cubs were around three to four months old. While two of the cubs were busy playing with each other, one came to its mother. The mother turned her chin up, almost closed her eyes and rubbed her chin on the cub's forehead and side of the face. While displaying affection the mother made an unusual and funny sound. I had never heard it before, nor did I know what it was for. Once home, I researched online and finally found the same kind of sound. It is called 'chuffing' – tigers make this sound when they are content or while showing affection.



A close-up photograph of a tiger yawning. The tiger's mouth is wide open, revealing its pink tongue and sharp teeth. Its whiskers are long and white, extending outwards. The tiger's fur is orange with black stripes. The background is dark and out of focus.

"I feel so yawn, yawn,
yawn, today..."



Wild Manners

Some photographs can be misleading. An image of a tiger with open mouth, showing its canines and incisors, curled up lips and cringed nose may frighten not only young children but even some adults. However, sometimes such an expression may not be aggression, but a completely harmless reflex of the tiger, such as yawning. Once, during my first safari in Nawegaon–Nagzira Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra, we saw a tigress from a distance, that too behind thick foliage. On the second safari, she was at the same spot but this time with two sub-adult male cubs, and all of them were relaxing behind the shrubs. It was getting hotter by the

minute and I could see the stomach of one of the cubs heaving. Finally, he got up and slowly wandered towards a water tank, just in front of the parked vehicles. Before quenching his thirst, he stopped under a tree and stretched his neck up as far as possible. With his nose close to the tree trunk, he started to sniff it. After a full minute or so, he looked around, curled his upper lip, crinkled his nose and stuck his tongue out, showing the entire set of his teeth.

Over time, I've seen this expression on several tigers – male and female, big and small, and it has always been after smelling tree trunks, shrubs, rocks or anything above the ground. I

OPPOSITE Pulling a funny face or it is something else?

asked a guide, who has been working in the tiger reserve for 18 years about this and he explained that this expression is called the 'Flehmen response.' He added that tigers and some other species have an organ located on the roof of their mouth that helps them identify different smells. While displaying this behaviour, tigers inhale more air to gather additional information, such as the presence of another tiger that may have intruded in their territory, prey in their domain, a kill in the vicinity, reproductive status of the opposite sex and any other unusual odour.

So after all, it is neither an agitated tiger nor a snarl, but in a photograph, just a yawn could be mistaken for a tiger roaring in anger!

One day, in Corbett Tiger Reserve, we had an uneventful morning safari. Even the birds kept a distance and there were hardly any mammals in the vicinity. So in the afternoon, I was keeping my fingers and toes crossed. While driving along a dusty track, we were overtaken by two vehicles and dust engulfed our jeep. I requested the driver to stop and wait for the dust to settle down. As the dust was settling, I saw a tiger resting behind the shrubs, right next to our vehicle! It was the first time that I had spotted a tiger before the guide or driver and I was ecstatic!

The tiger lifted his head to look at the jeep and then went back to sleep. After what seemed like ages, my patience finally paid off and he sat up. He let out a huge yawn and started licking his paws. The guide explained that when a tiger that has been resting starts to continuously yawn and lick its paws, it means that it is getting ready to move. He did get up and he did walk but to my disappointment, he lazily padded away into the forest, in the direction opposite to the vehicle track.

Tigers have a habit of grooming themselves and their cubs by licking. There are sharp bristle-like projections on their tongues. So when they lick, the tiny projections act like combs, removing dust, debris and dead hair from their coat. At other times, they lick when they get wounded. If you observe a tiger's poop, or scat, you will see different types of hair in it, which could be due to their diet consisting of furry animals and also because they keep licking themselves clean and grooming their cubs and siblings.

Once, I saw that the otherwise bold tigress Paarwali, who never hesitated to walk around vehicles, was not resting in the waterhole like usual but was lying near the stream instead. She looked a bit under the weather. Every now and then she would dip


her tail in the water as if to cool off on a hot summer day. She constantly kept licking her left paw. Zooming the camera on the paw, I noticed that she was licking a wound. An important aspect of a tiger's saliva, like other animals, is that it has antibacterial properties. By licking, they can stop a wound from getting infected and hasten the healing process.

Then there is a pose which may make you want to cuddle a tiger. One early morning, I set out for a long drive from the resort to the gate of Zone 8 in Ranthambhore. My teeth were chattering, my hands so cold that the fingers were locked at the joints, my

ABOVE Trying to grow up by smelling the tree trunk just like my mom
BELOW Self-healing is the best medicine







Salutation to nature —
arch your back, lift your chin
and stretch your legs, then
slowly open your eyes!

ears felt like they were ready to fall off and I was covered in so many layers of clothes that it looked like I was ready for an expedition to the North Pole. Not soon enough, my jeep finally entered the tiger reserve gate. It was still dark so I hadn't bothered to take off my gloves and check the camera settings. Five minutes into the safari, the driver whispered the magical words, "Tiger... Tiger." The cold was instantly forgotten! Gloves, scarves, lens cap — everything came flying off even before the driver could finish saying "...on the left." Straining my eyes through the viewfinder, I could see the good-looking hunk called Fateh. Since it was dawn, he was very alert. Then he started yawning, as if bored. After about half an hour, he finally got up and moved a few steps. Extending his front legs forward, he arched his back and pushed his chin up. He squeezed his eyes shut and stretched. This is another tiger behaviour called the 'yoga pose'. After getting up from a nap, they like to stretch. They stretch when they are totally relaxed and comfortable in their surroundings, and when they are ready to get moving.

However, I would like to add that tigers are not to be feared, nor revered nor cuddled. They should be treated just like any other wildlife, with respect.



Why Tigers?

Every time I drive across the forests and look around, I am amazed by the omnipresent balance in nature. The trees and shrubs and creepers are able to survive side by side. There is nothing like greed here. No one is big or small. Mother Nature provides for all equally, and there are links between everything to maintain the balance. Just look around when you visit the jungle next time, you will see the interdependence.

The snow on the mountain melts and forms lakes, or runs and transforms into rivers and rivers run into seas, the main mass for precipitation. Water in the lakes, rivers

and seas evaporates and dries up, and is then replenished again by snowfall and rainfall. Water is vital for every living organism. A healthy forest needs a sustained flow of water. A vibrant forest will have a healthy number of mammals, birds and insects and they find refuge on plants and trees. The fruits, leaves, seeds and nectar are food for herbivores. Birds, insects and herbivores are food for carnivores. All these inhabitants of the forests, who rely on plants for survival, are the main reason for pollination and dispersal of seeds. The dead vegetation, waste and dead organism again give back to nature as nutrients for growth and

OPPOSITE Don't turn your backs on tigers, they need us now more than ever

survival of the vegetation.

Nature has created herbivores to keep a balance on the vegetation, and predators to keep a balance on herbivores. This cycle is the food chain, with tigers at the top as apex predators. When a link is broken, the balance created by nature for the well being of all will tilt. The decline in large predators will result in an increase of other species, which will multiply and overflow. This uncontrolled increase in herbivores and decrease in predators means that the vegetation cannot be replenished at the same rate at which it is being consumed. The result of overgrazing means stunted growth or total wipeout of vegetation suitable for feeding, and overgrowth of inedible vegetation or total deterioration of the soil. The mammals will then overflow from their natural habitat due to lack of space and food and venture into fields and homes of humans as pests.

With an unprecedented increase in carbon dioxide from human activities, forests have become even more essential as 'carbon sinks'. Plants absorb carbon dioxide and give out oxygen, without which humans and other animals, except multicellular and complex animals, cannot survive. Thus, the long term effects of the declining numbers of tigers and other

top predators can be devastating, not only for nature but for human beings as well.

Remove one element from this web and the whole system would collapse. Look around the next time you're in a jungle and you'll notice it too.

Tigers can be seen as the brand ambassadors for the protection of the whole ecosystem. If so many organisms, be it plants, insects, birds or mammals can be protected under one tiger reserve, the tiger can be seen as a means to protect the whole ecosystem.

Efforts are being made by governments and non-government organisations all around the world to conserve and protect tigers and their habitats, by creating and enforcing laws, educating and empowering people, protecting and saving habitats, and tracking and studying tigers.

Around the fourteenth century, hunting tigers and other wild animals was considered an exotic pastime by the nobility, although they used to ensure that they hunted old or injured tigers and refrained from hunting mothers and young female tigers so that a balance was maintained in the forests. There are well-documented cases where tigers and leopards were hunted in massive numbers during the British Rule, to 'entertain' guests



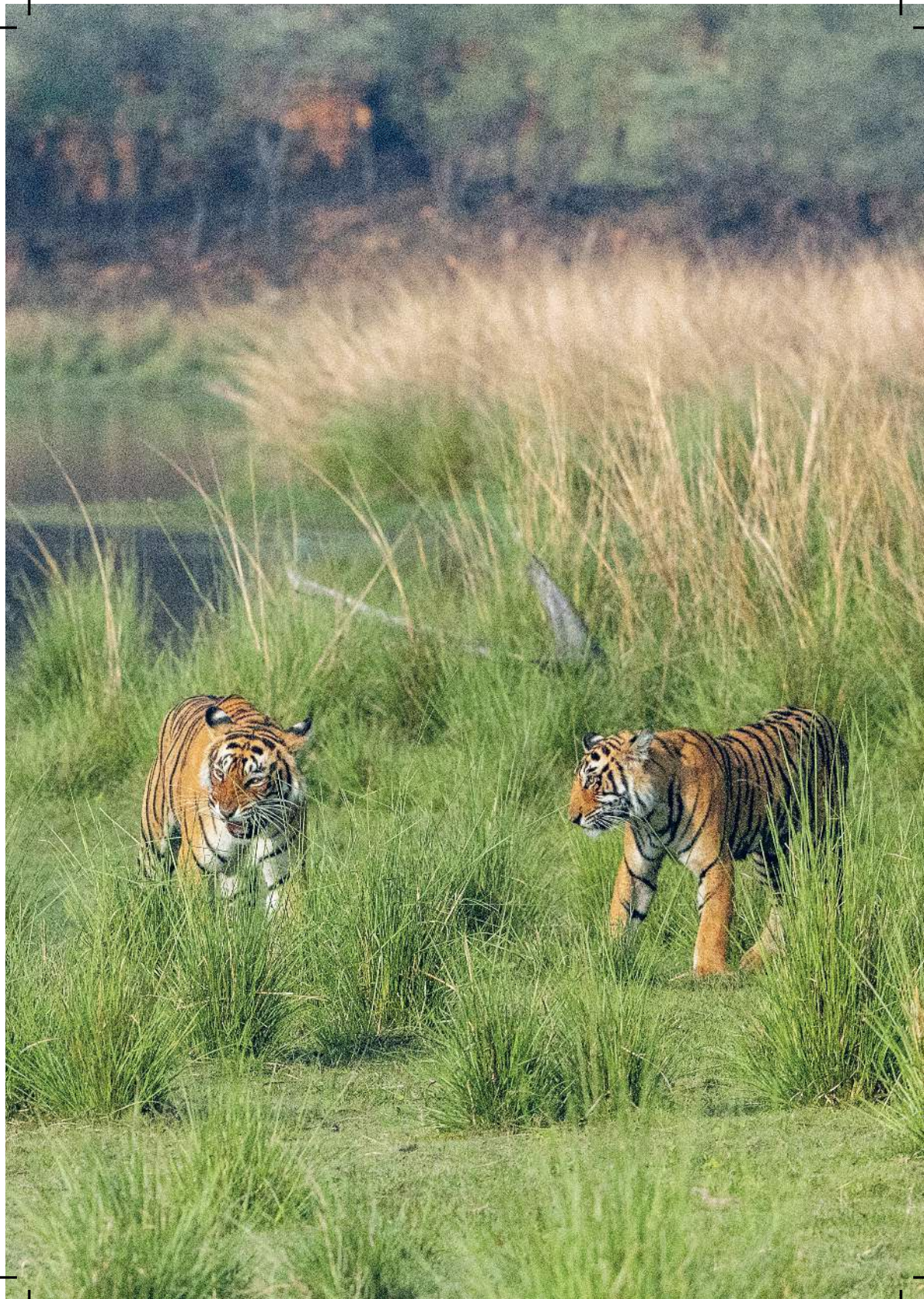
ABOVE Living in harmony

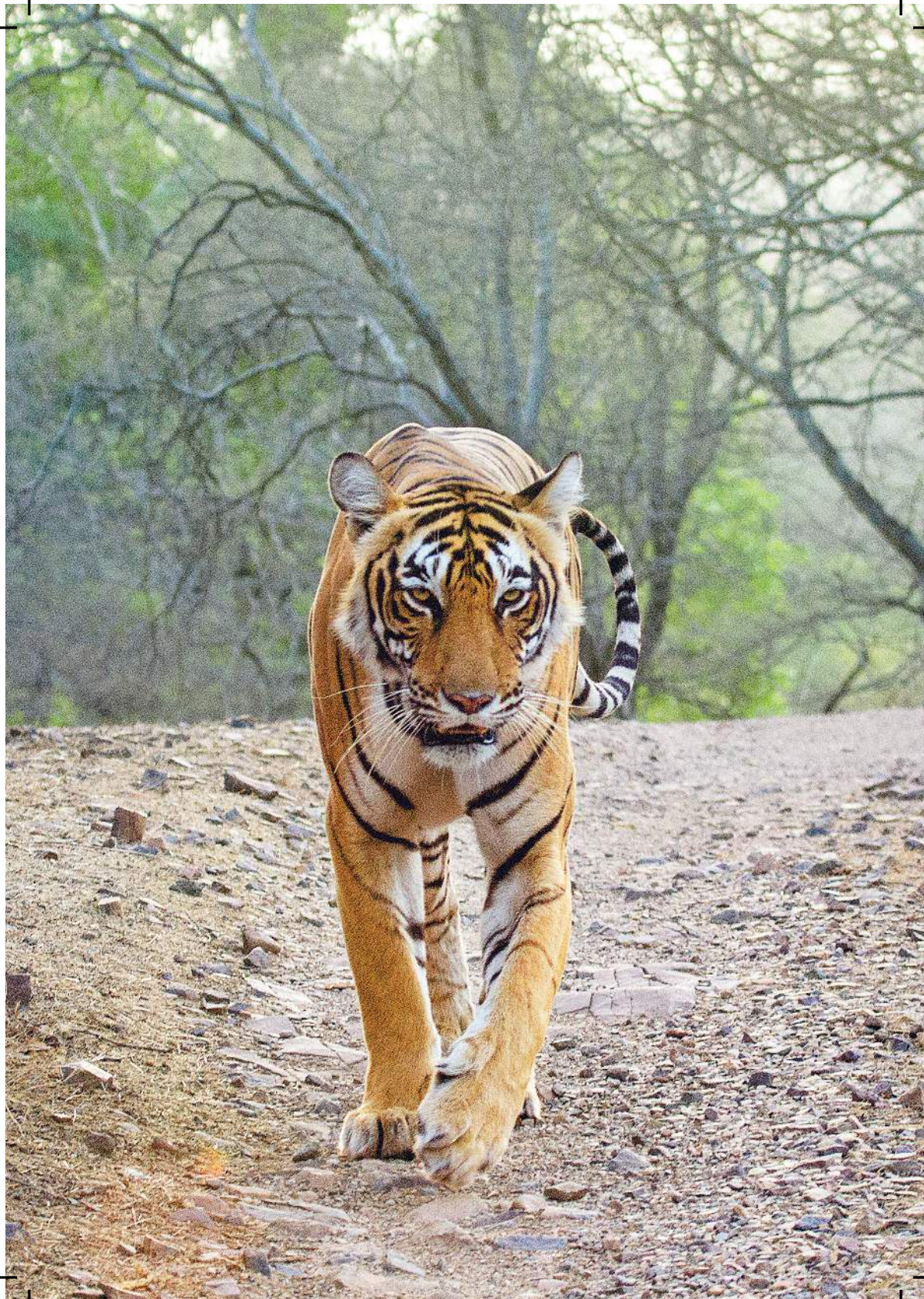
from abroad and fulfil the craze for fur coats and wraps for celebrities and royalties. For the protection of wild animals, birds and plants, the Indian Wildlife Protection Act was enacted in 1972. The act made it illegal to hunt and kill tigers and other wild animals in India. The tiger was declared the National Animal of India in 1973 and positive action by the government, forest departments, and others have helped bring the tiger back from the brink of extinction.

In 2010, thirteen countries where tigers still exist in the wild pledged to double the number of tigers in their natural habitat by 2022. They have also pledged to conserve habitats, especially breeding areas, conduct serious patrolling and have stricter law enforcement. The growth in numbers is still small and yes, it is something to celebrate, but conservation efforts for tigers and their habitats should continue aggressively. There is no scope for complacency now.

Thanks to increasing conservation efforts, tigresses are being able to produce larger litters and nurture more cubs to adulthood







A Brighter Future

Captive tigers already outnumber those in the wild. *“One of the world’s largest populations of tigers exists not in the wild – but in captivity in the United States. With an estimated 5,000 tigers, the U.S. captive tiger population exceeds the approximately 3,200 tigers in the wild.”* – WWF, 29 June 2014

Tiger farming is also on the rise – *“China alone has an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 captive tigers.”* – Rachael Bale and Jani Actman, Wildlife Watch, National Geographic, 24 February 2017

Is this the future we want? Tigers in captivity are not wild, nor free. I’ve had so many opportunities to observe these magnificent creatures in their

natural habitat that I know that’s where they belong and not anywhere else!

The first tigress I saw in the wild was T17 in Ranthambhore, and since then I’ve been lucky enough to see her on almost all my visits. I had seen her doing some amazing things, like lazing on her back with her legs in the air, drinking water, sitting in a pool of water, walking behind and along vehicles and even making a kill right in front of me! Suddenly, she just vanished, leaving behind her three cubs who were eleven months old. Tigresses are not known to leave their dependent cubs behind, they need their mother for survival. Before she

OPPOSITE T17: the tigress that started it all

disappeared, she had started living near a village, on the periphery of the reserve. The sad part is that, till date, nobody knows what happened to her. In my opinion, if she met with a natural death the forest officers and guards would have found some of her remains. Since nothing was found, I believe that she was killed and disposed off.

Instead of participating in a blame game, it would be better to keep working towards preventing wildlife poaching and safeguarding habitats. It should be the duty of every citizen to do her or his bit. First and foremost, we should follow the WildAid quote, “When the buying stops, the killing can too.” We should immediately stop

buying or supporting products made from endangered animals. Even meat obtained from wild animals, as exotic food, should be shunned. We can educate ourselves about the dangers faced by wildlife and ecosystems and work towards reducing our carbon footprint. Since more and more trees are being cut down in the name of development, the public should pressurise governments to plant more indigenous trees and plants. Moreover, just planting trees is not the solution; we all must ensure that they survive and thrive into a forest.

Writers and wildlife lovers are doing their bit by exposing poaching rackets and poachers, and writing

BELOW Man and beast can coexist, but it is up to us to protect their habitats



to raise awareness for the welfare of Nature. There is also an increase in the number of people who are pointing out complacency towards wildlife and the environment. This is another way to get the authorities to act for the benefit of the wilderness and its inhabitants.

The parenting style of young people today gives me hope. They are exposing their children to a variety of things apart from education. My young friends often take their children to jungles and other natural habitats, to introduce them to fauna and flora. Introducing children to the wilderness at an early age will shape their lives in many profound ways. These trips will make them caretakers of Mother Earth, which I'm sure will get handed down through the generations. From my experience, I can confidently say that these are the holidays that the children will remember fondly and not the expensive things that were bought for them.

To my young readers: Go to the jungle with an open mind and enjoy whatever you see. Animals' ability to hear is different from ours and they are used to the sounds of nature, not human noise. Please remember that we are entering the home of wild animals and we should honour their

environment. In the wilderness, our senses work better as well, so soak in as much as you can, through your eyes, your nose, your ears and feel the fresh air on your skin. We can smell different aromas from plants, flowers, insects and animals. We can hear better and distinguish between sounds. Our concentration is better, so we notice small things. Tigers are well-camouflaged and we might not see them unless there's a movement. So look out for the slightest movement and stay alert. Go out there! Enjoy nature, observe and absorb as much as you can.

For me, wildlife is more than just a hobby or a passion. With every trip to the jungle, I have become more compassionate, more patient; I have more reasons to feel alive and more reasons to be happy. I will not deny the fact that the dearest and closest to my heart are tigers. I want future generations to be able to experience tigers the way I have. I hope through this book, I have not only been able to convey my heartfelt love for these majestic animals, their cohabitants and habitats but have also inspired one or two young people, as they are the only ones who can and will bring extraordinary changes for the betterment of all the denizens of the wild!





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SAMBAR DEER
MOTHER AND CALF



Jungle denizens





**INDIAN
PEAFOWL**



MUGGER CROCODILES



**RHESUS
MACAQUE**



**INDIAN WILD
BOAR**



INDIAN BISON/GAUR

MALE SAMBAR DEER



BLUE BULL/NILGAI



GREY LANGUR



**INDIAN MUNTJAC/
BARKING DEER**



my tigers, my stories

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