

## Rain-drenched forest bristles with activity

23/07/2006

**P. Devarajan**



A LEOPARD AT the Tadoba Wildlife Sanctuary. — Kishor Rithe

Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, Chandrapur district, Maharashtra.

For long, one had wanted to walk and watch a forest in the rains and that happened when Kishor Rithe took me round my favourite tiger sanctuary blessed by the Tadoba Deo, the resident tribal god. One has not visited many sanctuaries but for me Tadoba is the best, far ahead of the much jazzed tiger sanctuary with Ranthambore as its first name.

Driving along one of many trails at Tadoba on my third visit, we spotted a two-year-old, mature leopard raising its head over a tree clump even as a chital let off a string of alarm calls alerting its friends.

It was around 3.55 p.m. and the light was quite clear for us to have a satisfying glimpse of the spots on the animal. For a minute, the leopard looked steadily at us from a distance of 50 ft. before making his way into the thick jungle.

In Mumbai, one has not seen a leopard at the Borivili National Park, even when they were preying on humans making a nuisance of themselves. At a late evening chat, Dr Shesharao H. Patil, Conservator of Forests and Field Director, Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR), was surprised at our *kismet* in spotting a leopard, a wily and shy customer at all times. "In Tadoba, you can see tigers and but rarely a leopard," he remarked.

The rains fell steadily outside with the raindrops tapping a waltz on the canvas roof of our vehicle. In the forest quiet, they did a jingle as if busy in some sibilant gossip.

"A steady rainfall is good for the land as the water drives deep into the soil. It is better than heavy rains which take away the top soil," explained Kishor.

The green sheen to the forests sometimes sparkles when the sun, breaking out of the clouds, falls on them and no paint company in the world can offer that shade to its customers.

Life breathes in the tall, teak trees with thali-sized leaves, while others like the aged *jamun* and mahua indulge themselves in the cool air like senior citizens happy with a mark-up in their deposit rates.

As we drove into Tadoba, we were met by a crowd of boars, more than 40 strong and of all sizes from four adults to new-borns.

They scrambled across our path with one little fellow scampering last as Kishor braked his Gypsy. We did not see tigers but that did not disappoint us as we had seen them in our previous trips.

One morning, we ran into a swarm of cheetals - about 500 in number - with their coats glistening from feeding on fresh grass put in place by the rains. They did not run away; they watched us from a distance of about 10 ft, wagged their short stumps and continued munching the grass.

"Tigers and leopards are sure of their feed," remarked Kishor as a few sambhars came into view.

Around the famed Tadoba lake, near to overflowing, one saw a crested serpent eagle with a white bar across its tail. It flew over us and landed on a bare tree to have a view of things around.

Birdman Dr Salim Ali writes of the bird: "An inhabitant of well-watered country and forested tracts, hill and plains keeps a lookout for prey from a branch high up in some lofty tree, preferably one commanding a clear view of the surrounding country. Commonly seen in pairs soaring in wide circles high up in the heavens, calling." We did not see a pair nor did the one we noticed called.

Departing from Tadoba is wrenching as the presiding tribal god never disappoints anyone, at least not this writer. The sanctuary is well managed.