

WILDLIFE

INDIA'S BIG SEVEN



THE ONE-HORNED INDIAN RHINOCEROS has been regularly hunted for its horn as it is presumed to be an aphrodisiac. Here cattle egrets keep company with an old male as it grazes in the Kaziranga National Park.

The diversity in India's jungles is spectacular. But seven iconic species are a big draw in wildlife tourism.

Text & photographs by N. Shiva Kumar



A YOUNG BULL ELEPHANT enjoying a dust bath in the Dhikala grasslands of the Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand.

THE tiger is the totem for wildlife tourism in India as it brings in plenty of big bucks. In 2017-18, the Ranthambhore National Park in Rajasthan had a revenue of Rs.33,77,28,080, which is indeed impressive. Similarly, the tiger reserves in Madhya Pradesh—Bandhavgarh, Kanha, Panna and Pench—earned 400 per cent more in tourism than what the State and Central governments provide as their annual budget.

Akin to Africa's "big five"—the elephant, the lion, the rhinoceros, the leopard and the buffalo—India has the "big seven", or seven beasts that are sacrosanct in their respective wilderness, the vast vistas of grasslands and woodlands that nurture them.

Several of India's wildlife sanctu-

aries were once hunting grounds of erstwhile maharajas, and more than 50 of these have been designated as tiger reserves, collectively covering an area of 72,749 sq km. An announcement was made on July 29, International Tiger Day, that the tiger population in India had risen to 2,967, according to the census conducted in 2018. Deaths, however, continued at about 200 a year.

Does the tiger deserve so much attention? Is it hogging the limelight or is it silently helping the other wild denizens of the forest as the uppermost animal in the food pyramid? B.C. Choudhry, a wildlife veteran with 40 years of experience and a faculty member of the Wildlife Institute of India, says: "India's impressive wildlife extends beyond tigers as the diversity in our jungles is amaz-



A MOTHER AND CALF navigating the cool but fast-flowing waters of the Ramganga river in the Corbett National Park.



TWO YOUNG MALE ASIATIC LIONS lead an attack on a far-off prey at the Gir National Park in Gujarat. Living in prides, lions usually hunt together to bring down large herbivores.

ing. There are tiny frogs, turtles, spotted deer, sloth bears, leopards, wild elephants, one-horned rhinoceroses, and so on. Let us try to move on from 'tiger tourism' and appreciate our jungles as a complete entity."

Mohit Aggarwal, CEO of Asian Adventures, a 25-year-old ecotour company, and a member of the board

of Asian Ecotourism Network, sees huge potential for "green ecotourism" in India. Mohit says: "The big cats are easily the star attraction of most wildlife destinations in the world, and India is home to four of the five true big cats: the tiger, the lion, the leopard and the snow leopard. Unfortunately, we have lost the

cheetah, one of the active hunters of the grasslands.

"But we have the Big-7 of wildlife and this can catapult wildlife tourism into the next level. Wildlife tourism can boost India's foreign exchange earnings and, at the same time, provide conservation cover to India's range of flora and fauna."

Indian elephant

"Please slow down, there are elephants on the move," warned our guide as we trekked in Silent Valley. It is unbelievable how the behemoths, weighing up to 5,000 kg, can move so silently, both as individuals and in herds. Equipped with soft but sturdy pads for walking, ele-

phants are wanderers of wild places, constantly on the move and munching fodder. They eat 400 kg of greenery a day to keep them going, dumping dung that fertilises the forest floor and aids seed dispersal.

The foothills of the Himalaya, where the Ramganga river meanders in the pristine jungles of the Corbett

National Park, is also an ideal place for elephants. The Ramganga and, forests and grasslands merge to create an idyllic location for elephants as they chomp on the choicest blades of grass or refresh themselves with dust and water baths.

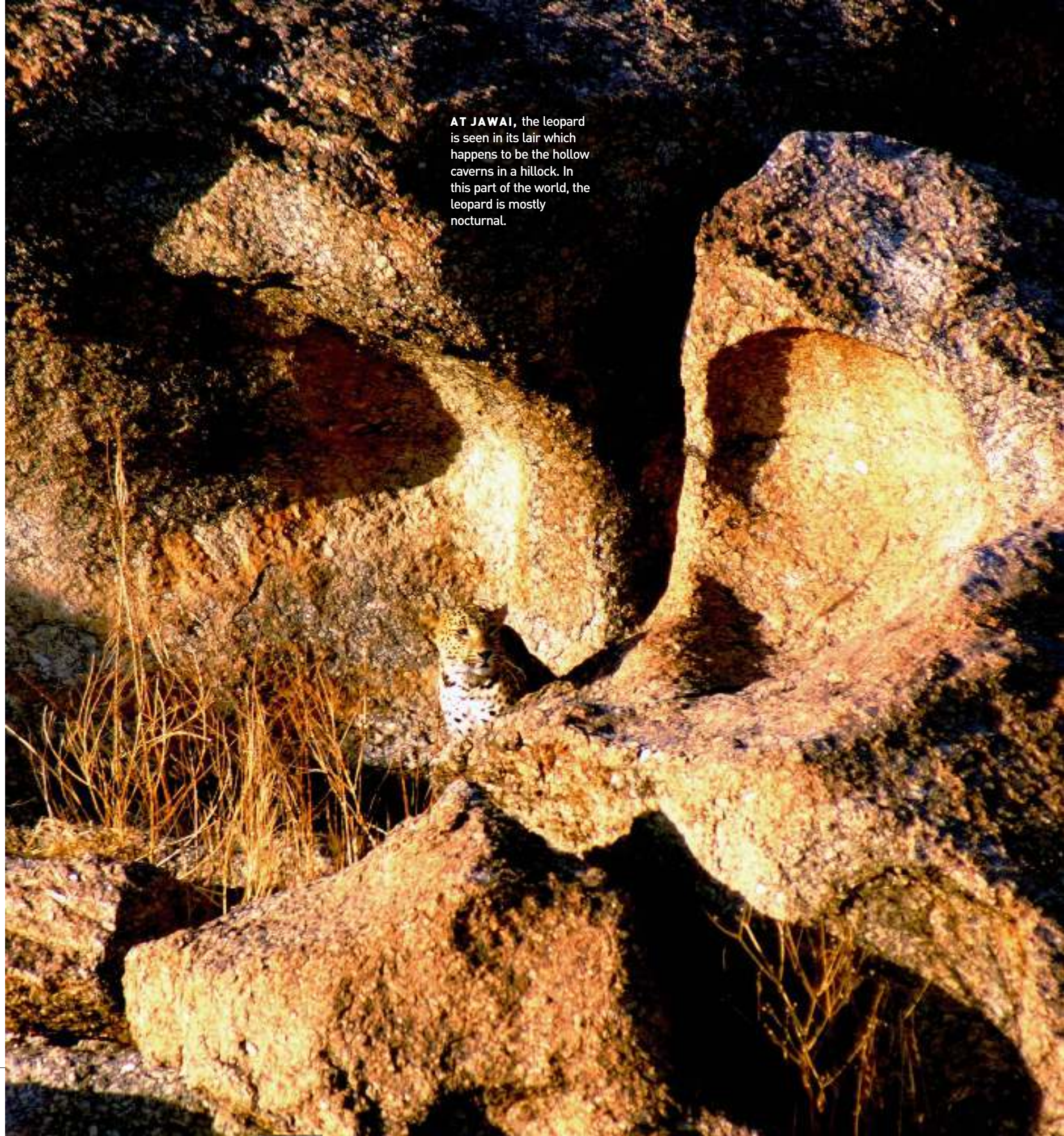
"India's much-fragmented forests host more than half of the



A YOUNG MALE ASIATIC LION in the Gir National Park looks back at an escaped prey. In the dry deciduous forests of Gujarat, food is not easy to find.



THE LEOPARD, known for its stealthy habits and camouflage techniques, is in its element in the jungles of Ranthambhore where it is extremely difficult to sight.



AT JAWAI, the leopard is seen in its lair which happens to be the hollow caverns in a hillock. In this part of the world, the leopard is mostly nocturnal.



SHORT-SIZED horns, a massive neck and alert eyes make the gaur look formidable.

EVEN WHEN resting, the gaur can be easily identified by its immense athletic build and powerful presence.



endangered Asian elephants in the wild. However, they are running out of space and time as the spread of human settlements is creating concrete jungles and squeezing elephant populations into diminishing compartments of woodlands. Those that survive are forced into areas of human activity in order to pass between fissured forests, and sometimes they feed on cultivated crops, which gives rise to conflict. The once harmonious relationship between elephants and people is breaking down. We need solutions to secure elephant corridors and minimise human-elephant conflict,” says Dr Sandeep Kumar Tiwari of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group.

Wild water buffalo

My first encounter with the buffalo was in 1988 and it was merely a glimpse. But in October 2018, we lingered around the same national park on the second day of our safari and managed to see boisterous buffaloes at dusk, crossing a large lake dotted with islands. The sun was above the skyline, with minutes to go for the sunset. The still waters stirred as the big black buffaloes generated silhouettes as they waded towards an island for a night of cud-chewing and slumber.

Dr Rahul Kaul of the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) says: “There is much more to India’s wildlife than flagship species such as the tiger or the rhino. While conservation efforts dedicated to these animals do have trickle-down benefits to other species that share their habitat, certain species such as the wild buffalo require direct interventions for their very survival.”

Once found in abundance across north-eastern and central India, the species is now restricted to north-eastern India, and a handful can be found in Chhattisgarh. The population is around 4,000 individuals and constitutes the largest population in the Indian landscape, accounting for almost 92 per cent of the world population.

The WTI has plans to shift five female buffaloes from Assam after the monsoons to replenish the wild stock



A MALE WATER BUFFALO with sweeping horns walks out wary after a mud bath in the Kaziranga National Park. Buffaloes love wallowing in liquid mud to get rid of insects.

in Chhattisgarh, says Rahul Kaul.

Indian rhinoceros

The one-horned rhinoceros is the second heaviest of the rhino species in the world, next only to the white rhino of Africa, and weighs about 1,400 to 2,700 kg. Standing six feet tall with a body length of almost 10 feet, it is enormous and resembles an armour-plated bulldozer. The rhino is powerful and plump with prominent folds of thick skin. The horn of the rhino, typically 20-61 cm long and weighing up to 3 kg, is its bane. The rhino is regularly hunted for the horn as it is thought to be an aphrodisiac. The one-horned rhino is rated as a vulnerable species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

At the turn of the 20th century, its population dropped to 200 individuals. The century-old Kaziranga Park was given the status of a World Heritage Site in 1985 for providing succour to the survival of endangered wildlife, particularly the one-horned rhino.

Dr Bibhab K. Talukdar, the Chair of the Asian Rhino Specialist Group

of the IUCN Species Survival Commission and Asia Coordinator of the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), explains that the protection of the rhino was possible only by preserving its habitat and ecology and garnering the support of local villagers. There has been an increase in the rhino population from 600 in 1975 to 3,580 in 2019 because of better protection from poachers, surveillance against natural and man-made threats and proactive habitat management.

Indian bison (gaur)

As the fourth-largest living land animal, the gaur, or Indian bison, is fighting a losing battle against ecological devastation. Standing over six feet tall and tipping the scales at about 1,000 kg, it ranks only after the elephant and the rhinoceros in size. It is unique in many ways, having a ridge instead of a hump along the spinal column. It “wears” contrasting white stockings on all four legs, with a glistening ebony body to boot. Of all the wild cattle in the world, the gaur stands top on the list as the ultimate ungulate. Equipped with a

heavy physique, it resembles a trained athlete on steroids. But the muscled monster is fighting a losing battle and dwindling in numbers. India has 17 major cattle breeds that were domesticated thousands of years ago. Strangely, the gaur has never been domesticated. Some scientists reckon that taming the gaur is tough because it is a hunk of an animal fortified with strength and a short temper.

Dr Asad Rahmani, former director of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), who has 40 years of research experience in natural history, says: “The authorities in India have to wake up to the reality of the endangered status of the gaur. Even the Asian Wild Cattle Specialist Group [AWCSG], established in the early 1980s with the goal to conserve Asia’s nine wild cattle species, is closely monitoring its status. Its numbers have increased in some protected areas, but the biggest threat today is the fear of epidemics like foot and mouth disease, rinderpest and anthrax. While poaching is prevalent, habitat degradation is a problem. Long-time studies are needed to provide authentic conservation methods for the Indian gaur.”

Leopard

The supple feline is neither spotted nor dotted but wears rosettes and is a cornered cat despite the ability and agility to perform better than other big cats in the art of survival. Clever and cunning, widely distributed, leopards can flourish in areas where other large carnivores cannot. But poaching and reduction in prey have negatively impacted leopard statistics. Leopards are killed in large numbers across the country on a regular basis.

Not easily sighted, these big cats lead a stealthy and secretive life, away from prying eyes. They are flourishing in the thin thickets of Jhalana and the hollow hillocks of Jawai in Rajasthan and have become tourist attractions.

Having experienced both these destinations, I was heartened to see that human-animal conflict does not

exist in these remote countryside locations.

Vidya Athreya, an ecologist with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), has been working on human-leopard interactions for more than a decade. She uses research findings to make informed decisions on policy documents relating to human-leopard conflict management. She is also a member of the IUCN Cat Specialist Group, and her work on the leopard in India has increased awareness of large carnivores outside protected areas. She says: “As an adaptable big cat, the leopard is able to reside and use human-use areas. Because of its greater adaptability, the conservation efforts required for the leopard are different from tigers. Leopard safaris in Jawai and Jhalana have evoked interest in the secretive life of the leopards, which goes a long way in respecting the species.”

Asiatic lion

Although designated as a national park, three highways, a railway line and smaller roads criss-cross the Gir lion sanctuary in Gujarat. Temples within the sanctuary draw thousands of pilgrims each year, “trampling the tranquillity” of the park. The habitat faces forest fire risks. Last year, the canine distemper virus caused two dozen deaths in the sanctuary, and this created panic among naturalists and wildlife enthusiasts worldwide.

It has been more than six years since the Supreme Court passed a judgment directing the authorities to guarantee a safe second home for the beleaguered Asiatic lion. The idea is to translocate a selected pride of lions to ensure the long-time survival of the endangered species. However, not much appears to have happened on the ground in spite of the huge sums that have been spent to create a second home at Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh.

Dr Faiyaz A. Khudsar, lead scientist at the Yamuna Biodiversity Park in Delhi who has worked for five years at Kuno, says: “The serpentine Kuno river sanctuary provides a thirst-quenching lifeline for flourishing flora and fauna on both its

THE SETTING SUN highlights the tiger’s orange hide with its emphatic stripes as it cools off in the running waters of the Ramganga river in the Corbett National Park.





SHORT-TEMPERED AND IRRITABLE by nature, the one-horned Indian rhinoceros stands its ground when it encounters tourists on an open-top Gypsy in the Kaziranga National Park.

banks. Over the years, all the 24 villages located inside the sanctuary were relocated and rehabilitated outside the sanctuary for the introduction of lions.”

“A second home will provide protection against extinction for the free-ranging lions, which is an integral part of India’s unique and diverse natural heritage,” says Dr Ravi Chellam, a senior wildlife ecologist who has studied the Asiatic lion for many years in the Gir forest.

Tiger

Tigers are designed to dominate the jungles with their ferocious hunting skills, and yet the tiger is in deep trouble. From an estimated 40,000 animals in India a century ago, the number has come down to around 3,000 in 2018. In recent years, there has been a steady upward trend, but the fear of extinction in the wild lingers like a sword of Damocles. A World Wide Fund for Nature and Wildlife Conservation Society (WWF-WCS) survey found that tigers have lost 93 per cent of their

historical range. In the last 10 years, tiger habitats have decreased by an alarming 45 per cent.

The tiger is a charismatic cat that plays a pivotal role in the well-being and preservation of the multiplicity of an ecosystem, be it the saline mangrove ecology of Sundarbans National Park or the thick jungles of Dudhwa National Park or the dry deciduous forest of Ranthambhore. Well-managed ecotourism in national parks and sanctuaries with increased visitor numbers keep the poachers off, say experts.

Another view is that tourism needs to be encouraged so that young Indians at the forefront of changing attitudes towards the environmental problems gripping the nation can find pertinent solutions. Wildlife tourism in India is evolving and with social media it is spreading as millennials seek encounters with “glamorous” wild animals.

The tiger conservationist Belinda Wright, who heads the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), has been working with State and Central

forest officials for decades. She and her team have been instrumental in curtailing wildlife crime in India. While Belinda Wright is pleased that the tiger population in India appears to be doing well, she says: “It is important that tigers are recognised as an umbrella species and that their habitat is strictly protected so that all the species that live in their domain are protected. India must safeguard its biodiversity to provide a healthy environment for all living things, including humans.”

On the subject of wildlife tourism, she says: “Tiger tourism is booming in India, but sadly, there is little respect or understanding of the importance of the lesser-known species that share the tiger’s home. We must make every effort to convert this interest in the tiger to secure an informed respect for our wild areas and all their inhabitants, big and small.” □

N. Shiva Kumar is an independent journalist and photographer specialising in wilderness and travel.