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# National Geographic: Land of the Tiger

By Unknown

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It is winter in Kanha National Park  
in central India.

These very same grasslands and  
forests were the inspiration  
for Rudyard Kipling's immortal  
Jungle Book stories.

The spirit of wild India that  
he evoked still lives here.

Kanha National Park is  
prime tiger country.

Sixty years ago its 363 square miles  
were part of vast primordial forests.  
Since then these forests have been  
denuded on a gigantic scale.

But Kanha has been preserved  
in its pristine state.

The tiger still roars here,  
still spreads his dread.

Just before dawn  
this male tiger killed a sambar stag.

Now, a few hours later,  
he drags his prize into deep cover  
to hide it

from the prying eyes of vultures.

Like all of his kind he is solitary  
for most of his life  
a lone hunter who lives by stealth.

The night has been cold.

The gray langur monkeys,  
after their first meal of the day,  
rest and groom each other  
in the warmth of the early sun.

winter is the season of birth  
for most langurs.

This newborn, only a few hours old,  
is the center of attraction.

The new member of the troop is passed  
from one female to another  
as many as ten times in half an hour.

It is treated with great curiosity  
and affection.

This "aunt" behavior, as it is called,  
inducts the infant into the troop,

makes it feel welcome and secure.  
The monsoon rains ceased  
more than two months ago.  
But along the streams the vegetation  
is still green.  
Grass-shrouded water holes are  
perfect hiding places  
from which the tiger tries  
to ambush the chital.  
Despite his power and camouflage  
the tiger often fails to make a kill.  
Only about one hunt in twenty  
ends in success.  
In mid-January, when winter  
is at its coldest,  
the rut of the barasingha  
reaches its peak.  
During this season of courtship  
and mating,  
stages bugle and fight  
to establish who among them  
will mate with the does.  
A tigress watches the combat  
from her cave  
where she is hiding newborn cubs.  
Helpless young with great fierceness  
and devotion.  
It will be some weeks before she will  
bring her cubs out into the open.  
For the most part, Kanha's tigers  
remain elusive and mysterious,  
concealed by the dense undergrowth  
and the jungles of grass.  
But in Ranthambhor National Park  
the habitat is drier and more open.  
In February, early spring in India,  
Ranthambhor's 64 square miles  
are already parched.  
The monsoon rains are only  
a vague memory.  
But cradled in the hills is  
a chain of lakes,  
and it is because of this permanent  
water that wild animals flourish here.

Unlike pristine Kanha,  
Ranthambhor has a long history  
of human occupation  
dating back to the 11th century.  
Dominating the reserve  
is Ranthambhor fort.  
Now deserted by man, the fort  
has become the haunt of animals.  
Centuries ago it was the focal point  
of a vigorous city.  
Battles raged back and forth  
over the hills.  
In more recent times villages thrived  
deep inside Ranthambhor.  
But their inhabitants have also gone.  
They were encouraged to settle  
on better land outside the park.  
Monuments to forgotten dramas  
dot the reserve.  
This stone marks the spot where  
a widow committed suttee  
where she burned herself alive  
on her husband's funeral pyre.  
Only the ruins remain.  
Man has moved out of Ranthambhor after  
almost a thousand years  
and returned it to the wildlife.  
On this cool spring morning it is not  
an ancient warrior who keeps vigil,  
but a tigress on the lookout for sambar,  
her favorite prey.  
When the sambar lie down to chew  
their cud, they are still out of range  
The tigress waits patiently.  
The deer's senses of smell  
and hearing are acute,  
but their vision is only moderate.  
As long as the tigress moves  
very, very slowly  
or remains motionless  
she cannot be seen by them,  
even when only 30 or 40 feet away.  
Her camouflage hides her completely.  
The wind shifts and

the tigress is scented.  
The hunt is over.  
A tigress stakes her claim to  
her home range  
by spraying prominent trees and bushes  
Male tigers mark their territories  
in a symbolic fashion.  
The size of a tiger's home range  
thus marked out varies widely.  
On the average a female's territory  
is some ten square miles.  
Males have much larger territories  
which overlap those of the females.  
When one tiger smells the scent  
of another  
it grimaces in what is  
called a "flehmen" display.  
By following scent markings  
and listening for roars,  
males and females find each other.  
The pair stays together for two or  
three days and mates frequently  
for some periods as often  
as every 10 to 15 minutes.  
The hills are almost devoid  
of nutritious grazing.  
The sambar must come to the lake  
to feed on water plant.  
The deer and the mugger crocodiles  
share the lake peaceably.  
The sambar are nervous and uneasy  
ready to flee at the slightest sound  
or movement.  
The constant and hidden menace  
of the tiger haunts their every move.  
Though he failed to make a kill,  
as is so often the case,  
this exceptionally bold  
and athletic male specializes in  
hunting from ambush around the lakes.  
Early the next morning this same tiger  
finally killed a sambar in the lake.  
But to his fury the crocodiles  
have snatched it from him.

Intimidated by the crocodiles'  
strangely aggressive behavior,  
the tiger reluctantly retreats.  
But like all of his kind he does not  
give up his quarry easily.  
For nine hours the tiger waits.  
When sambar come down to drink,  
he is not distracted from his purpose.  
Finally he summons up enough courage  
to reclaim his kill.  
The water is deep, and it takes  
a supreme feat of strength  
to swim through the water plants  
while dragging the 250-pound sambar.  
The crocodiles' teeth are designed to  
seize and hold prey,  
not to cut through skin.  
During all the hours the sambar lay  
in the water,  
they were unable to penetrate  
the deer's tough hide.  
The crocodiles make a few  
token objections,  
but in the end give up  
without a struggle.  
During the night a tigress has  
brought down a large sambar doe.  
The ever present tree pies  
are already in attendance.  
The birds eat only miniscule amounts,  
but the tigress resents any  
interference with her kill  
and relentlessly chases them off.  
Her usual strategy for dealing with  
constantly pestering scavengers  
would be to drag the carcass  
to a hiding place.  
But this kill is too heavy,  
the terrain too difficult.  
Another ruse would be to cover it  
with dry grass or leaf litter.  
But these are absent here,  
and the stones she tries to  
rake over her prize are ineffectual.

The only thing left to do  
is to guard her kill  
by virtually lying on top of it.  
The kill is well worth protecting  
for she can expect to feed on it  
for four days or more.  
The next morning the tigress  
is not at her kill.  
During the night it has been wrested  
from her by a male.  
She watches from a distance while  
the male feeds on her sambar.  
Wisely the tigress does not stay to  
dispute the ownership of the kill.  
She retreats to a spring  
deep in a ravine.  
Another tigress did fight over a kill.  
She came off second best.  
Spring is the rutting season  
for the sambar in Ranthambhor.  
The stages spray themselves  
with their male scent.  
In this way they become more  
attractive to the does  
and more intimidating to other males.  
In April, as spring changes to summer,  
it becomes drier and hotter.  
For the sambar the squeeze  
between the need to drink  
and eat in the lakes  
and running the gauntlet of tigers  
in ambush becomes ever tighter.  
The sambar,  
alert and cautious at all times,  
cannot see the tiger.  
To them the tall grass  
is like a blank wall.  
May is the height of summer  
in Ranthambhor.  
Tigers stay close to the water holes.  
Another six weeks of  
relentless heat must pass  
before the monsoon brings relief.  
Kanha, in the meantime,

has also dried out in the summer heat.  
But because it is a less arid region,  
many trees and shrubs remain green.  
The streams have ceased to flow.  
Only sporadic water holes remain.  
Moisture is at a premium.  
Even a patch on wet sand is prized  
by a blizzard of thirsty butterflies.  
The cubs of the cave-dwelling  
tigress have grown.  
The two, a male and a female,  
are now five months old.  
The cave has a commanding view,  
and the tigress keeps watch for  
possible prey  
and for anything that may be  
a threat to her cubs.  
In late afternoon the tigress sets  
off to hunt.  
The cubs follow her.  
Before she has gone very far  
the tigress meets a real danger  
to her young,  
the resident male tiger.  
She calls on all her ferocity to  
challenge the much larger animal.  
Territorial males, which are  
known to kill cubs,  
are the main threat  
to the young tigers.  
After the frightening confrontation,  
the female cub seeks reassurance.  
The summer heat continues.  
Every day it is 105 degrees  
or more in the shade.  
The few water holes are shrinking.  
Animals must travel long distances  
to drink.  
As in Ranthambhor, there is a constant  
threat from the well camouflaged tigers  
A white-breasted kingfisher  
has taken up residence  
and bathes frequently to cool himself.  
Langur monkeys spend hours licking salt

and other minerals from the rocks  
that surround the pool.  
The water hole attracts a multitude  
of birds.  
Even the shy red junglefowl, the gaudy  
ancestor of the domestic chicken,  
must leave the protection of  
the forest to drink.  
A lesser adjutant stork probes  
the water hole for fish and frogs.  
The checkered keelback snake is  
an unwelcome visitor  
treated with circumspection  
by the other animals.  
But the reptile is no threat  
to most of them.  
It is non-venomous and  
a confirmed fish-eater.  
The deserted water hole no longer  
has any interest for the tiger.  
When the oppressive heat  
of the day abates,  
the barasingha emerge from  
the forest to drink.  
It is a time too when the tigress  
and her cubs leave their cave.  
Before she sets out to feed  
on the remains of a sambar  
she killed two nights ago,  
the tigress suckles her young  
during an interlude of  
extraordinary peace and tenderness.  
This morning the tigress did not bring  
the cubs to her kill  
even though they are old enough  
to eat meat for themselves.  
Danger in the form of the male tiger  
is still near.  
When the male approaches,  
she hides the remains of her prey,  
covering it with leaves.  
She will stay with in  
until the threat has passed.  
Early June is the hottest,

driest time of the year.  
The shade temperature rises  
to 110 degrees.  
Tigers suffer more than most animals  
in this heat.  
Then one day in mid-June,  
as the koel and the brainfever  
bird scream for rain,  
a cool wind whips up;  
the air becomes humid.  
The monsoon has finally arrived.  
For four days it rains  
sometimes lightly, sometimes in torrents.  
The temperature drops about 20 degrees  
The heat, the dry streams,  
the brittle bleached grasses,  
the aridity of eight virtually  
rainless months  
have disappeared at one stroke.  
After the monsoon's first days of rain  
the sun briefly reappears.  
Kanha has been transformed,  
has taken on a cloak of fresh new green.  
Termites celebrate the onset on  
the monsoon with mating flights.  
Velvet-textured mites erupt out of  
the ground and feast on the termites.  
Male bullfrogs vie for the females  
in duels of sound.  
Life has been liberated by the rain.  
Plants explode into untrammelled growth  
The new lushness attracts hordes  
of leaf-eating insects,  
and when the caterpillars unleash  
their appetites on the monsoon's bounty,  
they are an effective restraint  
on the new leaves.  
In July, when the monsoon  
is firmly established,  
the chital gather on the grassland,  
which soon reverberate with the sounds  
and energy of their rut.  
A peacock unfurls his train a symbol  
for the renewal and exuberance of life

A predator other than the tiger,  
and one feared by all the animals,  
moves down from the hills  
at this time of year,  
spreading disquiet in forest  
and grassland alike.  
It is the Indian wild dog.  
No animal is safe from these marauders  
and even the mighty tiger will usually  
avoid a direct confrontation.  
The dogs move in packs that  
may number up to 30.  
though an individual wild dog  
could never challenge the supremacy  
of the tiger,  
large packs have been known  
to attack him.  
During such a fight the big cat can  
inflict heavy casualties.  
Once a besieged tiger destroyed 12 dogs  
before he himself was killed and eaten  
As the younger dogs play,  
they are watched by a mob  
of near-hysterical chital.  
The herd rushes into the forest  
where the pack will soon follow.  
The incapacitated are left behind.  
The lush grasses lure the reclusive gaur,  
or Indian bison,  
out of their forest strongholds.  
These are the largest wild  
cattle in the world.  
A large bull stands over six feet  
at the shoulder  
and may weight up to 2,000 pounds.  
The adults have little to fear  
from the tiger.  
It is the calves and yearlings  
that are vulnerable.  
Whenever a tiger is detected,  
when the cows and bulls snort  
and toss their heads in threat  
the big cat has no chance  
of making a kill.

To the contrary, an alerted herd  
can be a danger to the tiger.  
At the turn of the century some 40,000  
tigers stalked India's jungles.  
By 1972 they numbered fewer than 2000.  
This grim fact was the signal  
for courageous  
and far-reaching conservation efforts.  
These have been so effective that  
if the tiger is to survive in the wild  
its best chance is now probably  
in India,  
in reserves like Kanha and Ranthambhor  
where the tiger has already made  
an impressive comeback.  
With Kanha's riches restored  
by the monsoon,  
the tiger is no longer tied to  
a few scant water holes.  
It wanders widely and leaves the plains  
for the denser vegetation of the hills  
A green curtain is drawn over  
its presence,  
and the tiger becomes more  
elusive than ever,  
a hidden force that inspires  
even greater dread  
among all the animals  
that live under its tyranny.