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# Wildlifer





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## The Real King of the Jungle by Romulus and Zahida Whitaker.

Romulus Whitaker or 'Uncle Venom' as he is affectionately referred to by his friends, and photo editor Rajesh Bedi visited King Cobra country—the middle Andamans Island for a date with the real king of the jungle.

"King Cobra country gives me the same feeling that being in elephant country gives me," Whitaker writes. "My reflexes quicken and I take in and classify every little sound as if my life depended on it". Bedi's life certainly depended on his reflexes during their exciting sojourn. While taking pictures a small baby cobra crawled right towards his camera lens just to say 'hello'.

Romulus Whitaker is founder and honorary director of the Madras Snake Park Trust.

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## Worshipping The Snake Photofeature by Naresh Bedi.

People may refer to their enemies as 'a real snake in the grass'. However real snakes in the grass are not only taken seriously in India but also worshipped—for everything from fertility, and the desire to have a male offspring to good luck, virility, and wealth. Naresh Bedi's camera records in colour orthodox India's ceremonial rituals featuring the snake.

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## Dead Hindoo, Dead Hindoo.... Where? Where?

"Crocodiles wallowing in the mud of the Nile, or Garials in the Indus, are sights which one is prepared to encounter. But the traveller may wander far before he meets with a scene so strange and unexpected as that described", writes Andrew Leith Adams in his book "Wanderings of a Naturalist" published in 1867.



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## As Far As the Falcon Flies by S.M. Osman.

The knights of the Roundtable felt naked if they hunted without their hooded falcons. In India rich and poor enjoyed the sport. Hawks and falcons were the perpetual companions of Guru Gobind Singh and in AD 1628 Shah Jehan waged war on the Guru and his companions after their hawk had captured the Emperor's favourite rare white hawk, a battle the sikhs won. S.M. Osman descendant of the great king of Afghanistan is considered by many to be the greatest living expert on the peregrine falcon. His association with these hunting birds inspired him to study the factors that make the peregrine falcon so different from the other members of the family. A jug of wine, a falcon pucked on one wrist and thou beside me. What else could one want?

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## Rafi's Song

Twenty minutes after it is born the Gaur is ready to take-off and take on the world.



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## The Little Tiger's Story Photofeature by Naresh Bedi.

What does Little Tiger do on Sunday afternoons? Discuss the world of course. A delightful photo-feature by Naresh Bedi that will capture the hearts of children and adults alike.

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## A Hymn to Birds by Man Mohan Singh I.A.S.

How did in the last two thousand years more than 80 species of birds perish? How could man wipe out a magnificent bird like the Passenger Pigeon who roamed the vast skies in flights that were more like clouds of millions of them?

Man Mohan Singh's thoughtful essay on why it is important to preserve our avifauna will give the reader serious food for thought

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## Review: Saving the tiger

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## Reflections of a Mountain Donkey by Jeffery Campbell.

Jeffery Campbell's introduction to nature goes back to his school days. Along with a friend who owned a hand operated generator, he would go at night to the suburbs of Delhi in search of Hyena dens. Jeff's profession as a travel escort has helped him further his interest. Every summer since 1978 he has trekked in Ladakh, a land where nature abounds free and man is still governed by its forces. In his article he has vividly captured the beauty

and quaintness of the fauna in this exotic land. And when Jeff talks about 'Reflections of a Mountain Donkey', he means not himself but his trusted carrier.

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## The Guardian of Kalighati by Nihal Mathur

What's a Rajput from Jodhpur doing at Kalighati in Sariska? Looking after the animals in the Reserve of course. Nihal Mathur meets head forest guard Bhanwar Singh.



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## Bird Encounters of the Close Kind

Modern Indian Cities are full of relics from the past. Next to steel, glass and concrete are the ancient ruins of forts and mausoleums minars and masjids. Amidst these derelict buildings and ruins, and among the many gardens, ponds and rivers, are to be found undisturbed havens for the birds of the cities. Our bird-encounters will prompt you to reach for your binoculars and start looking.

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## Cartoon: Gopi Gajwani

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## Dachigam—A Tale of Ten Villages By James J. Mandros.

The fauna of Jammu and Kashmir State has a special place in the geographical realm of the world and some of the species of Wild animals such as Kashmir Stag, Brown Bear, snow Leopard and Ibex are unique in the state.

One of the least publicised but perhaps most exciting National Park development schemes is underway just twenty-six kms. outside of Srinagar—at Dachigam. Author James Mandros has made several trips to the Sanctuary with his family.



# The Guardian of Kalighati

BY NIHAL MATHUR.

He stepped out of the forest in faded greens. His dark brown complexion, blood shot eyes, unkempt hair, bushy whiskers and a fierce and rugged look gave him the unmistakable appearance of a dacoit. But Bhanwar Singh far from being a dreaded outlaw, is the Head Forest Guard in the Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan. During his 34 years at Sariska he has acquired not only a first hand knowledge of the forest and its denizens but also come to cherish and understand the flora and fauna of the region intimately.

What brought Bhanwar Singh, a Rajput from Jodhpur to Sariska? He muses for a moment and then answers quite matter-of-factly that he was a 'goonda' in his younger days with a daily routine of street scuffles and fist fights. Tired of such delinquency, he ran away to Jaipur at the age of 15. There he became a rickshaw puller; a job he did for four years and did not quite enjoy.

Then he got a break. A 'thakur' from his village brought him to Sariska and gave him a job of a 'chowkidar' at the Sariska Palace which belonged to the former ruler of Alwar. A gun was issued to him which he at once put to rather nefarious use. Defiantly, he shot a wild boar in the newly founded sanctuary of Sariska. This resulted in a row with the Range Officer and after all was said and done, the 'Ranger sahib' was sufficiently impressed with Bhanwar Singh and thought him fit to be on the right side of law. He offered Bhanwar Singh a 'pukka sarkari' job and so began his career in Sariska in 1957.

He worked as a Game Watcher, Tracker and Forest Guard in the various beats of the forest. In 1966, after completing his Forest Guard Training, he came to Kalighati forest

post and since then he has been there.

What are his duties at Kalighati? He has firstly to tie a bait whenever asked to do so. A regular feature once, this practice is largely dispensed with now. In the mornings and in the evenings he has to replenish the artificial water hole. Earlier he had to draw out bucketfuls from the well but now since the arrival of the diesel pump, this onerous task has become considerably easy. He is also the caretaker of the watch tower and has to look after its maintenance.

His other duties include pug-mark tracking and thereby keeping an account of the movement of the animals, especially those of the tiger. He has also to keep his eyes open for stealthy poachers and wood cutters and pilferers. Perhaps the most demanding job he is called upon to perform is to detect illegal grazing, impound cattle and apprehend the grazers.

How does he deal with these illegal activities? Of poaching, there is none in the core areas, he says. At the peripheries however, it persists. When he was attached to the Flying Squad, he helped catch many sambhar skins and bring the poachers—mostly tribal communities like Meenas and Bawarias—to book. To check grazing, he goes on surprise rounds of his beat and catches the culprits who are later fined. Besides, years of experience has attuned his ears to the faintest sound of crashing axe and he proudly claims that nobody dare chop wood in Kalighati.

Bhanwar Singh recollects a very nasty experience he had quite a few years back when he caught a ranking

government official stealing 'kala khair' wood from which 'katha' or catechu is extracted. Uncovered by authority, he proceeded to arrest the unnamed gentleman. An altercation naturally ensued, in which Bhanwar

Singh—one always for a fight—brought down a bamboo pole rather squarely on the head of one of the party members with disastrous results. He was dragged to the courts but as was expected, the Forest Department of Rajasthan, stoutly defended their faithful servant and Bhanwar Singh emerged absolved from all charges.

Such incidents, he says nonchalantly, are a professional hazard. But what of the danger he faces living amidst the wild animals? To his mind there has never been any untoward incident of consequence. Close calls with cobras and kraits during the rains have become commonplace events to get really disturbed about. Sometimes a rogue wild boar gives him some anxious moments. Otherwise, says Bhanwar Singh, wild animals are a peaceful lot and when left untouched are harmless. Animals on their part probably consider Bhanwar Singh a moving part of the landscape or at best a friendly fellow resident of their habitat.

This is more than evident by the fact that no sooner he finishes his dinner after dark the procupines arrive to scavenge for bits of food. The wild boars pay him a visit too during the day, a variety of birds come to peck at the crumbs. The tree pie is an unusually daring bird. It ventures so close to the plate as if demanding a fair share of the lunch!

And of tigers, there have been unbelievable encounters. Once, as the story goes, when Bhanwar Singh





reached the bait site with a buffalo calf he found a tiger waiting there already. He scolded the snarling cat to be patient and let him discharge his duty of tying the bait first.

At another time Bhanwar Singh was

fast asleep on his cot in the night when the Warden arrived in a jeep and to his horror he saw in the beam of the spotlight two tigers around the sleeping man. When the big cats moved away into the dark, the Warden rudely woke him up and

chided him for being careless with his life. He was ordered to sleep locked inside his one-room quarter. As soon as the Warden left, he went right back to sleep there itself, unmindful of prowling tigers.

Bhanwar Singh is nostalgic of the past. He recalls a time when there were no roads in Sariska and it was a dense forest, inaccessible and rich in game. Then came the roads and with it an ever increasing flow of people. Some people on the other hand were moved out when the villages of Kalighati and Salopka were shifted out of the sanctuary to make room for the animals. He remembers the Kalighati Watch Tower coming up before his eyes as also the other watch towers, rest houses and the tourist bungalow. All these years the tourist inflow kept on increasing unchecked and since 1979 when Sariska was declared a Project Tiger Reserve, the traffic increased manifold. Over the years he has witnessed Sariska transformed from a lonely stretch of wilderness to a highly marketed wildlife sanctuary in Rajasthan.

Although he laments the change of times, he has nevertheless braced himself for future. In four more years his retirement is due. What does he intend to do then? Go back to his native Jodhpur? No chance. Sariska is his home now and he plans to settle down in a village **just on the** boundary of the Reserve. Bhanwar Singh has acquired a plot of land allocated by the government and he wants to pass the remaining years tilling the soil and raising cattle.

But for the moment, under the canopy of stars, Bhanwar Singh sits listening to the piercing sounds coming from behind the hill. Alarm calls of chital stags he tells me, this the tigress with her cubs, he adds with an air of finality. And as we talk away into the night I cannot help but listen like a child to a man who makes the jungle as safe a place as it can be.