

Tiger Tales - Close Encounters

Narrated by Vivek Sharma

Bandhavgarh, May 5th 2006:

The clear open skies of the Indian summer beckoned me that night as I sat up late with my telescope watching the stars and their constellations. The gaseous clouds of Orion caught my fancy up above and as I embarked on my galactic journey the majestic growl of B2, shattered the silence of the still night and brought me to ground. B2 was the reigning dominant male in the tourism zone at Bandhavgarh National Park, India. He reigned supreme over 100 sq km, eight feet from head to tail-tip, muscular and in his prime, father to at least 6 litters, always on patrol visiting and providing re-assurance to his females and their cubs. B2 tonight was on the prowl at Jamunia moving towards the Chakradhara meadow, the former, home to the Sidh Baba tigress and her two 5 month old cubs. The Chakradhara plain was the abode of the beautiful Chakradhara tigress and her four 18 month old cubs.



As B2 moved through his territory there were no alarm calls from either the chattering monkeys or the quick z



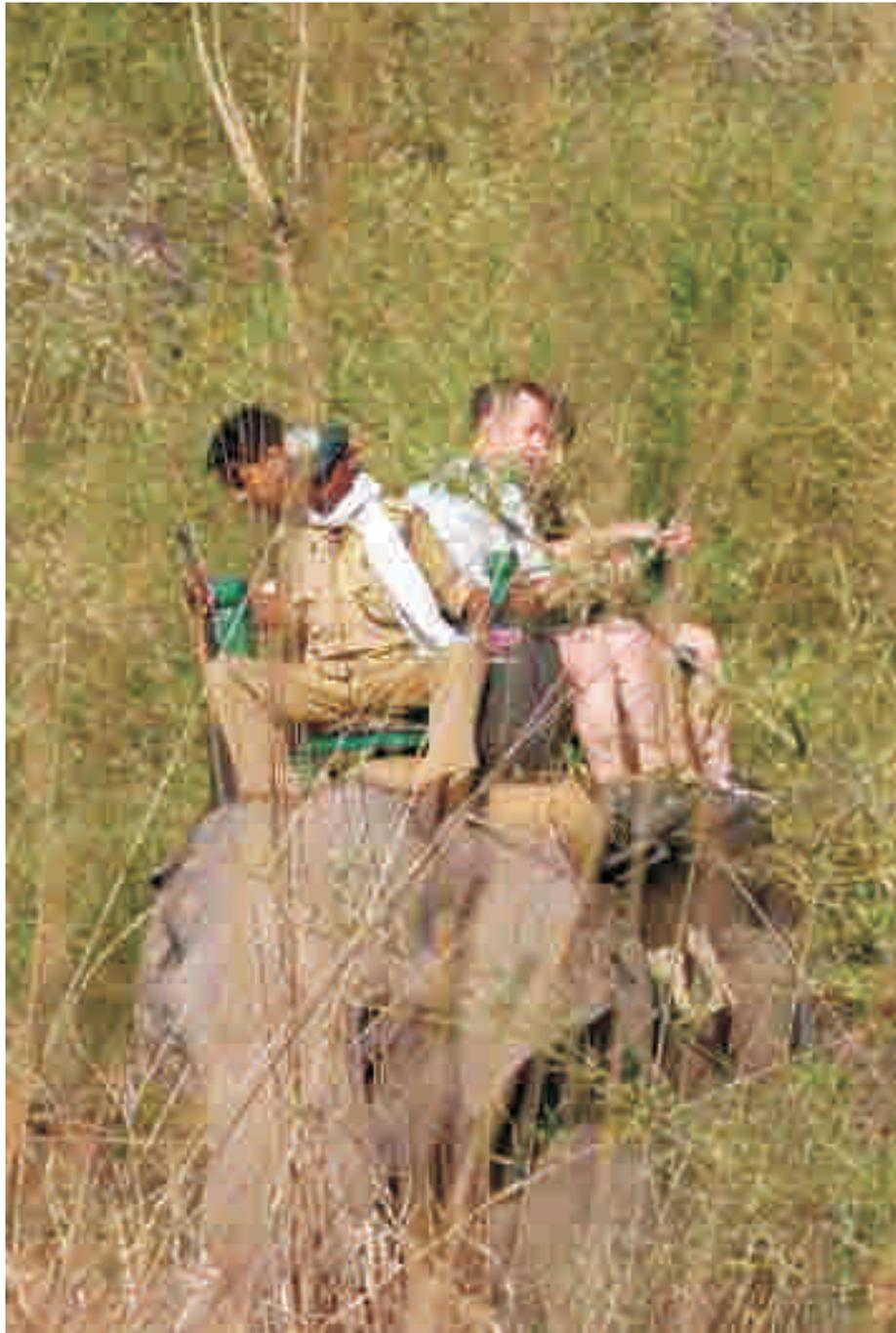
footed chital (spotted deer), the calm was occasionally broken by the calls from the spotted and mottled owls. After a short nap I was up early, my mind racing with the possibilities of encountering B2 in the Chakradhara meadow once the Park opened. I was to accompany my friend and photographer Richard and his dear wife Cheryl into the park at dawn. We left early and were one of the first to enter the park, we drove straight into the Sidh Baba tigress and her small cubs, tigresses

do not like too much attention especially when they have such small cubs and the Sidh Baba tigress made for the hills with her small cubs scampering along. I began looking for B2's pugmarks but could see none, no warning calls either. All of sudden I saw the Chakradhara female heading towards the marshy meadows, her family of 4 now sub adult cubs followed. Nearly fully grown the cubs would leave their mother in the next few months they were full of life and zest. Boisterous, these cubs were a handful, the dominant male amongst them now nearly as large as the mother.

It was a clear, bright summer's day; under the clear blue sky two jeeps watched the Chakradhara tigress teach her cubs the fine art of stalking and charging. The mother was giving lessons on making a kill...stalk silently, a sudden unexpected charge, a mock fight and suddenly they were all out of view, having disappeared further into the meadows for a quick meal provided for by mummy - a Chital (spotted deer) doe. For a family of 5 with the cubs now nearly fully grown a meal of this size could only be termed light. In half-an-hour they were back, under the watchful eyes of mother and hidden to human view the cubs were back to their 'stalk and charge' game.



The parks elephant brigade by now had started to assemble for the daily 'tiger show' and we were keen to get a closer view of this energetic family. Richard, Cheryl and I mounted Vanraj, looked after and cared for by his



mahout, my dear friend, Ramcharan. Cheryl and Richard sat on the left while I took the right. Mahout and elephant led us into the edge of the meadow crisscrossed with rivulets and water bodies surrounded by tall elephant grass eight feet in height, this was prime tiger country. The tall grass now tanned thanks to the harsh Indian summer provided the right camouflage and with the wind on their tail the cubs were busy charging and mock fighting. Marshy undergrowth, tall grass and a group of energised tigers made Vanraj nervous, animal instincts made him move towards safer, harder ground where he and not the tigers would be in control. Moving swiftly in this swamp was not easy and keeping one's balance even more difficult. Vanraj, in haste lost his footing forcing him to swerve right, I moved up at first and then straight down-I landed in tiger country with nothing but a camera and five tigers for company.

A tigress is one of the most protective mothers in the natural world; with cubs around she is at her ferocious best. In protection of her cubs and within moments of my landing the Chakradhara lady charged, attack is the best form of defence, I charged her too arms waving, screaming out loud, startled the tigress halted and stood on her hind legs. Surrounded on all sides by tall elephant grass I momentarily got a glimpse of Vanraj and Cheryl, in desperation of trying to keep the tall grass away I was waving my camera. The large lens which in the past had helped me capture intimate tiger moments of the Chakradhara tigress and her cubs was now acting as a wand as I tried to keep her at bay. What followed will always remain a puzzle was it my strange behaviour or the fact that she had seen me ever since she was a cub and I was someone familiar; the Queen of the meadows began retreating.



I too began my slow retreat; trying to get near Vanraj and Ramcharan for some form of security. Keeping the tigers in full view at all times I started moving backwards. Concentrating on the tigers up ahead and unaware of what lay behind me I unexpectedly found myself falling yet again, this time straight into one of the numerous water bodies, the water was chest deep and murky, rolling on my shoulders I pulled myself out covered with slush. Vanraj was still nervous and Ramcharan not wanting to leave me amongst hostile tigers was screaming instructions his voice making me aware of where to head, gingerly I got to the elephant. Cheryl helped me get the camera to safety while Richard tried to grab me, the best we both managed was touching our finger tips, Richard made one finally lunge and grabbed my arm but the slime and slush saw me slowly slipping away from his grasp. Two of cubs made their charge prompting Vanraj's instincts to make a run for cover despite Ramcharan's screaming assurances to pacify his ward. Within seconds a trumpeting Vanraj headed up the hill straight for a stretch of dense bamboo cover with Ramcharan, Richard and Cheryl clinging on for dear life. Elephants at the best of times are not smooth runners and when in distress they are hugely unstable. As the elephant charged through thick tall elephant grass and adjoining trees, Cheryl lay flat on the elephant's back, Richard held on to her with one hand while desperately trying to ward off tall elephant grass and overhanging branches with the other, one hit from these branches and either of the three on the elephant



would meet the same fate as me. I found myself back to where I had started, surrounded by tall grass, encircled by five tigers and this time with no magic wand to flaunt, my camera was with Cheryl. The silence that followed was eerie.

The jeeps were now queuing up for the days 'tiger show', the park ranger and his deputy had been told on the walkie-talkie by Ramcharan that he had lost control of Vanraj and I was down amongst tigers. Despondency hung all

around the air, the park rangers consulted and decide to send another elephant Sundergaj and his mahout Ramjan Khan to help. At the bamboo grove as Ramcharan attempted to bring Vanraj under control Cheryl and Richard helplessly wondered about the fate of their friend.

Attempting once again to get out of this marshy meadow I managed to move towards the nearest clearing closer to the edge of the forest. The elephant grass was less dense and I could spot two of the cubs a few meters away, I was unfortunately too close to her cubs and the mother charged, taking life into my own hands I screamed and charged her back, for the second time that morning the Queen retreated. Taking a cue from his mother one of male cubs made his charge and came so close I could feel his breath on me, I yelled, taken aback, he scampered back and joined his mother. This gave me the vital seconds to move to a clear patch and mentally picked out a tree to climb, tigers are not good tree climbers. If I moved towards the tree the tigers moved in closer, when I stopped they stopped too. I stood motionless wondering how long I could carry on this cat and mouse game with a bunch of wild tigers. From the corner of my eye I noticed Ramcharan had finally managed to get Vanraj under control and was heading towards us. Sundergaj with Ramjan Khan were also fast making ground headed in our direction. The tigers now retreated and it was their turn to keep us in their sights. Ramcharan got Vanraj to kneel down; Richard took no chances this time he grabbed my jacket and pulled me up. Ramjan Khan's smile assured me that I was finally safe. Ramjan Khan is a very interesting man with a great sense of humour, I have been working with him and the other mahouts now for over ten years, their life, language and vocabulary all revolve around the tigers they so fiercely protect. Once a female guest of mine asked Ramjan Khan how many children he had. Ramjan's replied with great pride "two cubs". Ramjan then asked how many cubs my guest had, on being told she had none, Ramjan laughed aloud and in his husky voice told her "that means no mating".



As we headed back to the safety of the parked jeeps on the motor-able tracks of the park Sundergaj and Vanraj now firmly in control, the Chakradhara family sat and watched us disappear into human territory wondering where and when would their next close encounter with humans would be.