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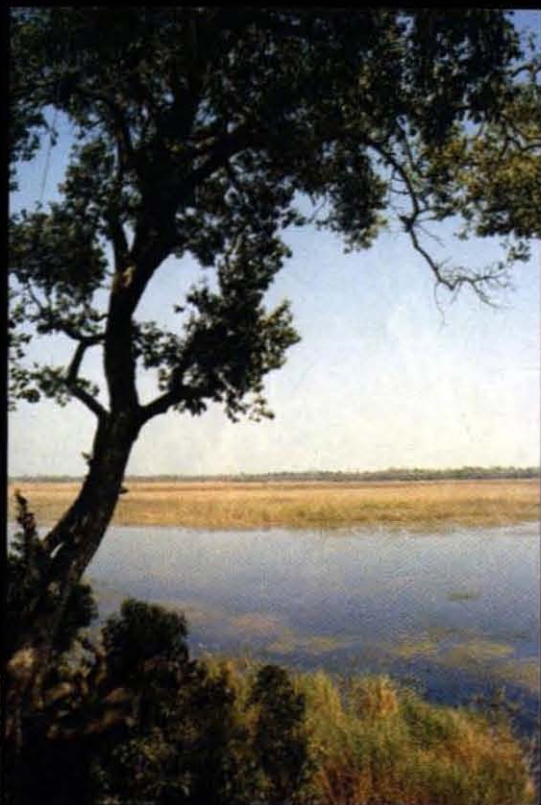


10/8/2004

# DUDHWA NATIONAL PARK



# ...in daylight and darkness



GAYATRI W. UGRA

Sunset is falling over Dudhwa National Park and the powers that be must give it a thought. If India and Nepal are unable to manage the annual flooding of the Sharda river, another kind of sunset may descend on the Park.

Excess flood water remains stagnant in the taals of Dudhwa, killing much of the vegetation. Bare, leafless, dead trees stand stark against the bright sky. A member says "Isn't this a graveyard of trees!"



GAYATRI W. UGRA

## ■ GAYATRI W. UGRA

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GAYATRI W. UGRA

Snake in the Grass – *Python molurus*

A twig snaps underfoot like a pistol shot in the eerie silence, the breeze whispers in the trees, leaves rustle, a phantom sound perceived only by the sixth sense. Mohammad Naseem, our guide, draws us close, warning us to be completely silent, as we walk along a sandbank through the tall elephant grass. Suddenly he stops short, pointing at the ground. We come upon our first pug mark, large enough to be from the kind of forepaw that can kill a man in one blow, and we pray that we will see its owner too. But no luck today, and we leave the trail with the uncanny feeling that the tigress has seen us, even though we haven't seen her!

The Dudhwa National Park website said "more than 30,000 insects" ... a paradise for an insect freak. That clinched it. I booked myself on the impending BNHS trip to Dudhwa in Lakhimpur Kheri district, along the Indo-Nepal border. And what a trip!

Rivka Israel and I got together at CST Mumbai on 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2004, to board the

Pushpak Express. We arrived in Lucknow amidst the colourful revelry of Holi, with great trepidation left the station, got drenched in magenta and yellow on the way to the guest house, but still managed half a day of sight seeing and watching garden birds.

Next morning, we were on our way to Mailani. As the train sped past lush green wheat fields, our bird count began with eight graceful sarus cranes, peacocks in mango orchards, pied kingfishers hovering over village ponds dense with water chestnut, and a rare singleton, the shabby, scrappy scavenger vulture. More mundane sightings included glistening black drongos, perched on the electric lines all the way, and any number of cattle egrets in the pools and puddles along the track. From Mailani, it was a gruelling two hours on the dusty, cobbled roads of Uttar (Ultra?) Pradesh, till we reached the somewhat cooler *terai* habitat of Dudhwa National Park, where moist grassland and dense saal forests dominate.



MEETHIL MOMAYA

### Small blue kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* perched over a Taal

Humans are advised to stay in the jeep, as tigers walk free ... it's their homeground! You also save yourself the indubitably hair raising experience of coming face to face with a rhino. With the possibility of elephant herds from Nepal joining these excitements, we had anticipated a holiday not for the faint hearted. And we soon discovered that we were right. But no animal, as Rivka says, can match the menace of man. Two days earlier, the forest guard of Shitlapur beat, Shesh Giri, had been hacked to death by armed poachers. I am told that poachers lay traps even across the jeep track in the forest. They come for the tiger and the rhino, of which there is a closely guarded population of 18 in the Park, enclosed by electric fencing.

It is 3 p.m. on 8<sup>th</sup> March as the last of the participants arrive, and we are informed by the inimitable Mr. P.B. Shekar, our group leader, that there will be a bird walk along the railway track inside the Park. Wandering off alone is strictly

forbidden, putting most of the flowers and insects beyond my reach, so I join the dedicated birdwatchers that form the core group in any BNHS camp. Darters and cormorants are perched on bare branches, spreading out their wings to dry, moorhen and teal swim in small flocks in the water, while chestnut-headed bee-eaters half-hover and swoop at their flying targets, the gnats and midges swarming in the evening light over the lake. All along we see Rohini trees, whose round red fruit yields the kumkum that Indian women wear on their foreheads. Dr. M.R. Almeida, our botanist group leader, points out the violet spikes of *Pogostemon bengalensis*, the only confirmed herbal antidote for the venom of the viper *Echis carinatus*, which I hope I shall never need to test on myself.

The first morning, and speaking of reptiles, can one ever forget the sight of the rock python that we see in Kishanpur. It lies basking in the sun, gorged and sluggish after a meal that can be

seen externally from its dilated midbody. A rush to look closer, a scream from one panicky member, and it begins to slide away with amazing rapidity for such a huge creature. (Only after our return to Mumbai are we able to assess its true size from the photographs ... it was 12 ft long! And then I am not surprised that the lady screamed.) I have trouble convincing her that it is not venomous, is not moving to attack us, and judging from the sudden, sharp, ammoniacal smell of urine that all of us can discern, it is more alarmed than angry, and only wants to get away. That is not to underestimate the tremendous strength of a 12 ft long python, whose constricting musculature can put paid to an adult human being.

More reptiles – a mugger lies basking in Suheli river, half draped over a fallen tree trunk, so absolutely motionless and mud covered that it appears to be a stone relic from the Jurassic period. Its mottled blue, brown and purple colouring is revealed only when we see another one swimming in the same stream later on. But nothing seems to animate this first one so long as we watch it. A blue-eared kingfisher perched on a branch ruffles its purple-blue and white plumage, its brilliance reflected in the stream

below, then it takes off to roost. That night there is commotion in the jungle, an alarm call that lasts more than six minutes. Some say it's the chital, others insist that it is hog deer, but neither way do we get to see the large feline that set it off.

We leave the Forest Rest House early morning in four jeeps, usually with just a cup of tea and biscuits for fuel. An empty stomach, it seems, is conducive to good birding; it sharpens one's senses and the eye sees more than it would if one had fed liberally on the kind of hot parathas that follow on our return. The spartan menu of Dr. Salim Ali's field camps must have had a purpose other than mere economy, I think, as we drive under a canopy of saal, shisham and haldu trees. The lucky ones see a flight of hornbills, six, seven, eight, they recount excitedly, when we return to camp. Both the Oriental pied and great pied! Naseem says his day is made, for he has rarely seen more than four or five at a time in this forest. The final tally at the end of the trip is 97 species of birds alone. My own attention keeps returning to the intricate inter-relationships displayed in the towering red silk cotton or semul trees that grow wild in the whole area from Lucknow to Dudhwa. The heavy nectar and pollen of the showy red flowers

The heavy nectar and pollen  
of the flowers  
on the trees attracts ants,  
bees and purple sunbirds,  
while redvented, blackheaded  
and redcheeked bulbuls  
visit the trees in abundance.  
And undoubtedly waiting  
to pounce on them  
is this short-toed eagle.

**Short-toed eagle keeps watch for prey**



ASOKE LAHIRI

attracts numerous ants, bees and purple sunbirds. The red-vented, black-headed and red-whiskered bulbuls come to the tree in abundance, delicately picking off insects and sipping nectar from the flowers. And undoubtedly waiting to pounce on them are the raptors: the great crested, serpent and short-toed eagles, and the black kite. Outside the Tiger Reserve, driving through Kishanpur, I had seen seven Indian white-backed vultures on a red semul, while Rivka counted at least 44 on one tree.

Other trees coming into bloom outside the Tiger Reserve are the palash, wreathed with brilliant vermilion flowers that yield a dye used to play Holi in the old days. They evoke images of Chaitra, of spring warming to summer (and examination fever!). So does the gorgeous red erythrina, which harbours the same bird-insect-flower food chain as the red and yellow semul.

Dudhwa National Park was created in 1977 to protect the swamp deer or barasingha, which we now watch from a machaan across a jheel in Sathiana. My binoculars focus on one, two, then a hundred of them, browsing beyond the waterspread that hosts cormorants, darters, coot, teal, black stork, white-necked stork, pintail and jacana, and if you look long and hard, bush larks

on the ground. I watch the antlers of one magnificent male barasingha as it raises its head, then lowers it again, lazily cropping off the grass, unaware of my attention. It is difficult to choose one's favourite among the ungulates here: the dappled cheetal that moves in small herds on the fringes of the forest and is easily seen, the less numerous darker coated hog deer that raises its tail in alarm and bounds away, sambar which we never saw, or the smallest one, the red-brown Indian barking deer *Muntiacus muntjak*. It is too quick for me to get a really good look, and the only other time I saw it was in a cytology lab, where even the most well cared for animals look pathetic at best.

Next morning we are in for a star sighting, the rhinos of Dudhwa. The air is mist laden as we drive through the forest, our hands stiff in the morning chill, clutching camera and binoculars. The jeeps stop at a forest post where a Shaheed Smaarak or memorial stands: a grim reminder of the fate of two forest personnel killed at night by a tiger. Never underestimate the awesome strength of nature, it tells its silent story. Here we mount a rough wooden machaan, and two elephants are brought alongside for us to clamber on, four at a time. The mahout tells us that our

**Bankey – the two ton dandy**



G. MAHESWARAN

Bankey – the debonair dandy – is a two ton alpha male, from whom the taal is named. He revels in his superior status, dominating the other rhinos in the enclosure, so that there is talk of relocating him to give the other males an opportunity to breed.

mount is named Pushpakali, and a heftier flower bud would be hard to find. Her regal pace and sturdy step are reassuring, until we enter Bankey taal, a slushy, muddy, leech infested swamp, where the elephant grass brushes against our legs. Khair trees, which yield *kattha*, grow near the fringes of the swamp, with carton nests of tree ants on their sparse-leaved branches. Ashy prinias and many warblers flit among the reeds. As we go further into the slush, the elephant stumbles and totters, and keeps trying to go off on her own, but is prodded back on course by the mahout with a mean looking iron *ankush*. He stands astride Pushpakali's massive shoulders to get a better view, and then points out the hero of the day, Bankey.

## A monument of insect architecture – termite hill



GAYATRI W. UGRA

Bankey – the debonair dandy – is the 2000 kg alpha male around here, from whom the taal is named. He revels in his superior status, dominating the 17 other rhinos in the 29 sq. km enclosure, so much so that there is talk of relocating him to give the other males an opportunity to breed. What we first see is an ugly, warty rear end, and we have to manouvre the elephant past him for a lateral view. Then we appreciate the awesome power of the animal within the slaty grey armoured shroud of a skin. Even from our vantage point atop Pushpakali, his dimensions are imposing. The horn is about 18 cm long, to give an indication of the total size. He humphs and snorts, and sends shivers down our spines. Frantically, I capture as much as I can on camera, and then venture a closer look through the binoculars. He bares one long tooth, and the mahout advises us that Bankey has had enough, so we proceed as rapidly as Pushpakali's legs will carry us through the swamp on to the 2 km mud track. The seemingly endless ride, seated on a jerky earthquake, calls to mind Aldous Huxley's words on his first elephant ride up Amber Hill in Rajasthan "I returned full of respect for Hannibal, he crossed the Alps on elephant back."

That evening we go to Tiger Haven, where we meet the legendary but controversial Billy Arjan Singh. Hailed by some for his lifetime achievement in tiger conservation, criticized by others for allegedly "contaminating" the tiger gene pool, he continues his good work. On his private land, chickpea is grown for the peacocks as well as their less glamorous females, which step delicately in the fields, feeding on the soft new sprouts. Sugar cane is planted on the rest of the farm. Here too, we see yellow-headed wagtails, pied bushchats, ashy prinias and other seed eaters, typical grassland birds in plenty. Sunset is falling over Tiger Haven, and the powers that be must give it a thought. If India is unable to come to an agreement with Nepal to manage the seasonal flooding in this region, another kind of sunset may descend on Dudhwa National Park.

The problems that beset Dudhwa National Park are as varied and numerous as its habitats and biodiversity. Patrolling this vast 490 sq. km of grassland, swamp, water bodies and moist

deciduous forest, intersected by 40 km of railway track, is a challenge in logistics for the notoriously ill-equipped forest department. The extensive area of the Park also reduces the chance of seeing “glamorous” species like the tiger that draw public interest and management attention, which are more often seen in the smaller Bandhavgarh.

Extensive deforestation in Nepal has led to flooding of the River Sharda, which last year washed away large tracts and rendered homeless scores of villagers who are camped some 40 km away, in thatched mud huts, with nothing but their few heads of buffalo to scrape together a living. Excess flood water that remains stagnant in the taals of Dudhwa has killed much of the vegetation, and bare, leafless, dead trees stand stark against the bright afternoon sky. A member says “Isn’t this a graveyard of trees!” and I cannot help agreeing. We drive on through grassland, flushing out a startled pair of black partridge. Past the breeding ground of the Bengal florican, but Naseem tells us that it is yet to appear, despite its breeding season having started.

On the evening of 12<sup>th</sup> March, we return to the bridge over the Suheli, where we first saw the croc. All day, my eyes have been scanning the canopy, hoping to sight a hornbill. There are jamun trees enough for them to nest in. I sit silently, alone with my thoughts, regretting that we missed the tiger, which all of us were dying to see. The others too are slipping into return mode, talking about the trip that was. Suddenly there is a cry “Hornbill, hornbill!” Excitement breaks out again, the magnificent great pied hornbill *Buceros bicornis* is perched on the branch of a distant tree. “Another one!” and then I see an unforgettable sight – two birds take wing, their wing tips flapping up and down, the rhythmic wing beat steady as they sail across from one side of the valley to the other, infinitely more complex and graceful than any man-made flying machine. The tiger is forgotten, and my day is made. What better crowning glory for a BNHS trip than these cousins of William, the Society’s own hornbill!

Daybreak on 14<sup>th</sup> March, we say our goodbyes reluctantly, as it has been a great camp.

Five of us take a forty minute walk to Dudhwa station, along a jeep track between towering saal trees and enormous termite mounds. We follow two sets of fresh tiger pug marks, an adult and a juvenile, scanning the undergrowth, hoping we might see them yet, but they exit the path just before the railway track appears. At the station, which must be the original Sleepy Hollow (it takes half an hour to buy a ticket!), we rest dreamily against our little hill of backpacks. A “sher” was seen here the previous evening. There is my incentive for the next trip! A shrill whistle interrupts the flow of thought, and I join the rest in a hurried scramble to board the train. ❁

Another raptor, the crested serpent-eagle, is seen in the Park

MEETHIL MOMAYA

