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lage, Perur Post, Mahabalipuram Road,
Chinglepet District, Madras 603 104.

Vijay Paranjpye, Durga, 92/2 Erand-
wane, Pune 411 004

Circulation: E. Chesrose

Subscriptions: Madhu Sahgal

Advertisements: Shashi Kumar, ACPL,
No. 602, Maker Chamber V, Nariman
Point, Bombay 400 021. Tel: 230061/
230081.

Processing & Printing: Conway Print-
ers Pvt. Ltd., Bombay 400 018.

Marketing: Magazine Distribution Sec-
tion, Hiralal Printing Works Pvt. Ltd.

Institutional Sales: Natraj Publishers
17, Rajpur Road, Dehra Dun.

Computerised Design & Setting: The
Print Shop, 146, Todi Industrial Estate,
N.M. Joshi Marg, Bombay 400 011.

Sanctuary Asia is published and
printed by Shashi Kumar every quarter.
We welcome contributions and shall
offer suitable reimbursement for ac-
cepted material. Write to us for terms
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For any further queries write to: 'SANCTUARY
ASIA' MAGAZINE, No 602, Maker Chambers V,
Nariman Point, Bombay 400 021

INSIDE SANCTUARY

ASIA: THE COMPLETE ECOLOGY & WILDLIFE QUARTERLY

VOL. IX. NO. 1. JANUARY/MARCH 1989



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Bullets, poison and habitat destruction threaten the very existence of the 815 sq. km Dudhwa National Park.

Ravi Sankaran spent several months studying the famous grasslands of this *terai* jungle and shares with us his concern and admiration for this sub-Himalayan paradise.

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The rare, white oryx -- symbol of power, dignity and pride which was totally exterminated from Saudi Arabia in 1972, will soon return to the wilds, thanks to almost 25 years of international co-operation writes Asad Rahmani.



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Legends have been woven around mantids for eons, writes E. Narayan whose article on these fascinating insects provides us with an insight into one of nature's arch predators.

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Butterflies are specialised in the art of defensive camouflage -- sheep in wolves' clothing, in fact, says the author, Torben Larsen. Mimicry is only one of the many weapons in their repertoire in the struggle for survival.



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DUDHWA

Last of the Indian *terrai*

Text and photographs by Ravi Sankaran



After several ups and downs, the rhino translocation programme in Dudhwa (Vol. IV, No.3) seems to have succeeded. Seen here is a rhino in its prime in the lush green grasslands of Dudhwa.





Asad Rahmani

The author spent hours observing wildlife from atop machans (above) and hides. It was the swamp deer (facing page), locally called the gond, and not the tiger which laid the foundation for the protection of Dudhwa.





*A hand-reared swamp partridge (*Francolinus gularis*) (facing page) adopted the author and his assistant Mehboob, and provided delightful company in the long hours they spent in the wilderness. The Bengal florican (**above left**), a resident of Dudhwa, is among the rarest bustards in the world. A drongo makes a meal of a martin (**above**) as a black partridge (**below left**) calls an end to the day from atop its roost.*

Discovering Dudhwa

Winter had been thawed by the advent of spring. But this morning's chill was reminiscent of the weeks gone by. The swallows had just awakened, and clouds of them would leave their roost and soar briefly, before returning to the bare branches of *seemul* trees. The dew of the night rose in an enveloping fog, swiftly hiding the grassland before me. As the rising sun dissolved the fog, I drove down to Muthna Machan. I was not there long when a family of otters, fishing for breakfast, came swimming down the narrow *tal* below me. I watched their marvellous aquatic poetry, as they dived and swam, silent ripples marking their progress. I was particularly amazed at the intelligence of one of them. Often, when the others dove, it would stand up treading the water. Invariably an alarmed fish would burst out of the water and the otter would snap it from the air. And of course, this particular otter seemed the best-fed of all!

I first came to the Dudhwa National Park in April 1985. Our team consisted of four scientists from the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), surveying the *terai* of India in an attempt to assess the status of the Bengal florican. To me it was, in a sense, the starting point of what has been an exciting career in ornithology. And I could not ask for a lovelier starting point. So when Dr. Asad Rahmani, who was heading the team, said that we would, in fact, eventually set up camp at Dudhwa, to study the Bengal florican, a dream was born.

It was, however, not until 1987 that the dream came true. I found that Dudhwa was even lovelier than I remembered, and soon the forests and grasslands totally captivated me. That year, I spent a month and a half; the next year, five months. I learnt much about the forest and the animals that live there, a lot more about Dudhwa and the specific problems that afflict this vital Park.

The Dudhwa National Park is today the sixteenth and the latest member of that privileged group of forested areas that come under the purview of Project Tiger. It was, however, the swamp deer, locally called *gond*, and not the tiger which laid the foundations of protection and conservation in this area. Until Independence, great herds of these deer roamed the marshes, grasslands and forests that came to be known as the *terai*. It was a hostile land to man. Old district gazetteers

speak of recurrent attacks of plague, great swarms of malarial mosquitoes and of a couple of severe famines. But by the 1950s, one of the last Indian frontiers had been tamed, and the marshes and the grasslands soon made way for sugar-cane and paddy. The boom of "crop protection guns" then hammered in all but the last few nails in the swamp deer's coffin.

It was about this time that fierce lobbying by an ardent lover of Dudhwa, 'Billy' Arjan Singh, began to pay dividends. Operating from his farm, called 'Tiger Haven', his efforts culminated in the creation of the Dudhwa Sanctuary in 1968, covering an area of 212 sq. km. The swamp deer now gained a new lease on life. In early 1977 the sanctuary was further upgraded to a National Park covering an area of 614 sq. km. Ten years later, at the end of 1987, Dudhwa National Park and the Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary (though not contiguous) were brought under the umbrella of Project Tiger. The project area now covers an area of 815 sq. km. and houses the largest number of swamp deer in India.

Dudhwa lies in the *terai* belt of Uttar Pradesh. Towards the north flows the Mohana river, beyond which is Nepal and on a clear day one can easily see the Himalaya about 30 km. distant. The southern boundary is formed by the Suheli river, which, together with the Mohana are tributaries of the Sharada, which in turn joins the Ganges river system. The topography is more or less even, with a mere 32-metre rise between the extreme south-eastern and northern corners. An interesting feature of Dudhwa's soil is the virtual absence of stones or rocks on the surface, a phenomenon yet to be adequately explained.

Typical to the *terai*, the ground water level is high. In fact, according to an old immigrant, when as children they used to take cattle out to graze in summer they could alleviate their thirst by digging only a metre down for water in chosen depressions! In an environment that receives over 1,600 mm. of rain annually and is seasonally prone to flooding, the forests and grasslands of Dudhwa are lush with plant life.

Dudhwa's forests are best described as being moist deciduous and dominated by *sal*. In fact, the *sal* forests, which clothe over 50 per cent of the Park, have been described as one of the finest stands in the country. Along rivers and streams, *jamun* is more prevalent, these trees needing a lot

more moisture to flourish.

Several years ago when existing forestry practices were inclined towards commercial gains, a fair amount of plantation work was carried out. Teak, *sheeshum* and to a lesser extent the infamous eucalyptus were planted, often at the cost of the original mixed forests. Being alien to this environment, both teak and eucalyptus have not done well. Yet, to see eucalyptus amidst fine tracts of forest or grassland is a painful sight. Some consolation exists in the knowledge that eucalyptus logs are used for posts in electric fences. So the day is not too far off when Dudhwa will be rid of this tree!

I sit on a patch of lawn, burned brown by the summer sun. The coolness of the night is a relief after the vicious heat of the day. The Indian jungle nightjar with its monotonous *chaunk... chaunk* and, less frequently, the Franklin's nightjar with its *sweesh*, call incessantly. Occasionally, an Indian cuckoo or a magpie robin bursts into song. I looked forward to this tranquillity at the end of each day.

The sharp crack of exploding gunpowder shatters that tranquillity. Firecracker or firearm? It came from the crop fields barely a kilometre from where I sat, or perhaps from the forest itself. It's difficult to echo-locate sound in a jungle. And the victim? Probably a boar, hog deer or swamp deer. I winced at the thought of yet another animal poached, but in the last few months the sounds of gunfire had become almost commonplace.

Every week, I drive down to Pallia, the nearest town, to stock up on food. In an hour or two I am already tired of this dusty and noisy town. The forest stands like a wall, with sugar-cane fields extending right up to its base. When returning, just crossing the Suheli bridge itself is like coming home. The drive from Dudhwa to Satiana is something I will never tire of -- an avenue lined with *sal*, the sun, a diffused object somewhere above, throwing patches of light and shadow on the road. On the sides the vegetation has been cleared to serve as a fire line. From the ground rise massive termite mounds. My eyes search for a particular species of termite which nest in smaller mounds. These seem to have dispensed with aggressive soldiers, of which the larger mounds are full. At home wait two, hungry, termite-eating partridge chicks.

One day, sitting in the sun, sipping tea, I saw

Doodnath the gardener come quietly up to me with a purposeful glint in his eye. Digging into his pockets, he fished out six partridge eggs and nonchalantly handed them to me. Apparently his children found them and as they were not edible (they floated on water) he asked if I wanted to try and have them hatched? As there was a hen sitting on her eggs at a Forester's house nearby, I decided to give it a try.

Two survived. One was *Langad*, so named for the deformed toes on one foot, and the other we simply called *Teetar*. They were thoroughly imprinted on us, following us everywhere and running up to us when whistled to. The Satiana log hut compound, which was appropriately called Teetar Kutir, had virtually been taken over by the little ones. In fact, the moment they lost sight of people they got very alarmed. It was not until they lost their down feathers that I found out they were swamp partridges.

They were an absolute nuisance, but one that I wouldn't have missed for anything. One of their favourite pastimes was to perch on either Mehboob (my assistant) or myself! If we sat on a chair they were quite content to perch on our knees. When I went into my room to lie down they would soon follow, pause at the door, and then with a contented cackle fly and land on the bed. A moment later they would hop on to my person. As far as they were concerned I was just another partridge, albeit larger! They would 'dust bathe' on me, or preen, or rest on their sides, with legs outstretched. I must confess it was a habit that I enjoyed only in the beginning, for, as I learned to my cost, you can't toilet-train a partridge!

At Kowhaghathi, the road dips down to cross the Neora *nullah*. It seems innocuous now, but religiously every monsoon this Jekyll and Hyde stream transforms its character, smashes the Kowhaghathi bridge and chews up a part of the road, before subsiding back into being a sleepy stream. A massive turtle has made its home in the deep pool below the bridge and I invariably stop to seek it out, only to move on when it disappears amidst bubbles.

Grassy paradise

The forest abruptly opens out into the grasslands, which to my mind are the main attraction in Dudhwa. In these grasslands reside some of





Fighting fire with fire! A controlled fire (facing page) which was started by Park authorities, to save miles of valuable grassland habitat in Dudhwa from being consumed by natural fires. Little appreciated reptiles, like the elegant bronze-backed tree snake (top), have proliferated thanks to the protection given to the jungle in the name of the swamp deer, rhino and tiger. Lakes in Dudhwa play host to a number of water birds such as this shoveller (above) searching for food in Bankey Tal.

Dudhwa's rarest animals and birds. Possibly no part of the *terai* generates more awe than the grasslands. 'Dank and dangerous...inhabited by ferocious creatures' are only some among several colourful phrases used to describe them. But they are so true, for these humid areas are covered by grasses which in most places even tower over elephants.

The grasslands reach their prime just after the monsoons. Through the monsoons and most of winter, therefore, one hardly sees any wildlife for all is hidden. Virtually impenetrable on foot, the grasslands are best seen from the back of an elephant. As you push past, silvery flowers of *munj* erupt in a puff of smoky pollen, a constant rain of the petals of drying *retwa* cover you with red dust. Nearer to water sources, *retwa* and *munj* give way to the golden flowers of *narkul*, or acres of *kans* with more fibrous cotton-like flowers. In the early morning, flowers, heavy with dew, bend their supple stalks and catch the light like a million jewels.

At the end of winter the grasses shrivel and die. The pleasant greens gradually return to brown. Thin, tall stalks poking up into the sky remind one of the promise of flowers yet to bloom. At the end of January it is time for the annual grass burn, a management practice designed to maintain the grasslands. On a warm windy day the fires are lit, which roar across the grasslands leaving ashes and half-burnt grass stalks in their wake. In a matter of days all the grasslands are an extensive charred openness. Animals that have been hidden to the human eye for several months are now visible in the open. Underfoot the shoots of grass push their way out of the ground and swiftly conceal the ashes of the previous year's vegetation. It is a time of anticipation, for it is now that the swamp deer return to the Park.

Dudhwa is a deer haven. It is one of the few places in India where five species of deer co-exist -- chital, sambar, muntjak, hog deer and, of course, the swamp deer for which the Park is so justly famous.

The swamp deer are primarily grassland animals and are widespread in Dudhwa with densest populations in Satiana and Madraiya. The deer are however not present here all through the year. With the onset of the monsoons the deer leave the safety of the Park and spend the next few months in the crop fields and the swamps that adjoin the

Park. It is here in the swampy areas of Ghola and Gajrola that the annual rut begins at the end of October. As wallowing is an intrinsic part of the breeding season, rutting stags are almost always found in a *jheel* or swampy habitat. It is both the need for the marshy habitat and a strong sense of tradition that bring the deer back each year to their rutting grounds. This vital habitat today is under severe pressure from agriculture.

Even with the animals inside the Park all is not well. It is alarming to note that the population is now showing a declining trend. From an estimated population of 1,000 swamp deer in the Satiana region in 1980 the population has dropped to about 500 in 1988. While protection is excellent within the Park it is when the deer move outside that the problem begins. In the agricultural areas of Ghola and Gajrola poaching is rampant. Affluence and gun licences for protecting sugar-cane crops have proved to be a fatal combination for the deer which virtually come to the farmers' doorsteps to be shot. Patrolling at best is poor, for three guards and a forester cannot possibly protect a 13 km. stretch of sugar-cane and swamp, while also trying to prevent wood poaching, encroachment, etc.

Quite obviously there are no easy solutions. To the south, Dudhwa unfortunately does not have a buffer zone. All that divides the core area in the Satiana region and the agricultural areas of Ghola and Gajrola is the narrow Suheli river. Even the erection of an electric fence along the river has proved ineffective. The deer constantly find ways to cross it. Perhaps the only solution is to acquire this recently encroached upon land so that the swamp deer have a place to breed in peace.

At the end of January, at the fag end of the annual grass burn, when the swamp deer return to the Park they are still in their dull winter pelage. They now congregate in big herds on the recently burnt grasslands, attracted no doubt by the outcrop of fresh new shoots. Adult stags still carry their massive branched antlers; several does have fawns at their heels, fawns they dropped in the tall grass just before the onset of the monsoons. Late evenings are enlivened by the bugling of stags towards the end of yet another breeding season. With the onset of summer, the stags begin shedding their antlers. The long dark hair of the deer's winter coat start falling off to reveal their lightly spotted, chestnut coloured coats. As the days lengthen into summer the swamp deer begin to

disperse and the big herds that one saw through February and March are no longer visible.

Though Dudhwa has seen protection since as far back as 1967, for some species the efforts have been in vain. Chausingha which were said to be present in this district in the late 1800s have become extinct in the region. The wild dog or dhole has vanished, the blackbuck was last seen in the Park in 1984 and the leopard is becoming increasingly rare. The nilgai and the sloth bear, both said to be common in the recent past, are now hardly seen.

Dudhwa the bird haven

Flashes of russet or white in the dappled light of the forest are revealed as paradise flycatchers; strips of undulating white ribbons, flitting between trees. Their habits are more than a little puzzling. At one time there would be plenty, then suddenly they would 'vanish' for months on end. Then, suddenly, they would reappear in great numbers. It was the same with the Indian pitta, emerald doves, some cuckoos and bee eaters. Where did they go? What brought them back? The lack of satisfactory answers starkly brought home to me how little I know about birds in spite of being a field ornithologist by profession!

A trip into the field was always exciting, for one never knew what lay in store. With luck, a blue bearded bee eater by a stream, or a flock of large pied hornbills calling raucously. Once, while walking in the grassland I flushed a grass owl and that really made my day! Some of my favourite places for bird watching were the *tals* and *jheels*. A flock of 400 or 500 lesser whistling teal taking to the air is a breathtaking sight. Once while watching ducks through a telescope I saw a falcated teal, which had me enraptured; the last time I had seen one was in 1985 at Bharatpur. Some of the smaller *tals*, hidden in the forest, have a prehistoric aura about them. Here, one fondly hopes, we might actually discover that long-lost resident of the *terai* -- the pink headed duck.

Over 350 species of birds have been recorded from Dudhwa, but none so rare, or as handsome as the Bengal florican. It once was present throughout the *terai* belt, but in recent years has been exterminated over much of its former range. The Bengal florican is possibly the rarest bustard in the world and only about 600 survive today. The Dudhwa National Park has the distinction of

being the only known place in Uttar Pradesh where this beautiful bustard exists. About 40 to 50 of these birds share the grasslands of Dudhwa, with the swamp deer. The Bengal florican has a unique courtship display, like an aerial ballet. With a noisy flapping of wings, it takes to the air, descends a little before gaining height once more, ultimately landing in a dive. This flight is accompanied by a peculiar high-pitched 'chick' call. Its startlingly white wings contrast with its black body and when framed by an emerald forest, the bird presents an unforgettable sight.

Another elusive grassland dweller is the hispid hare. While I have never seen one with certainty, the characteristic tablet-shaped droppings of this hare are to be found in almost all the major grasslands of the Park.

A unique experiment undertaken by the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department, has been the rhino re-introduction programme (*Sanctuary Vol. 4 No. 3*). The rhino was last seen in this region in 1878 and a pioneering attempt was therefore made when five rhinos were translocated from Assam in 1984. Unfortunately, a pregnant female died and then later, another succumbed to complications that arose when she had to be tranquilized to treat a leg injury. In 1985 four more rhinos were brought in from Nepal. At present seven rhinos, two males and five females, live within an electrically fenced area of 27.5 sq. km. At the appropriate time, when the population stabilises, the fences will be removed. In any event, the translocation has already proved to be partly successful. At the end of 1987 one of the females gave birth to a calf, a sure sign of the small group having accepted their new home. It was unfortunate though, that the calf did not survive as it was either stillborn, or taken by a tiger. One waits in eager anticipation for the next calf to be born.

At the end of February, as if on cue, the chital drop their fawns. On drives I often observed them gazing intently at my approaching Jeep only to dash off madly, their fear totally out of proportion with the potential source of danger -- me! It's amazing how fast fawns can run using their typical bounding leaps, the white under-tail standing out like a flag. It's hard on the doe now, for she has to move fast every time her fawns burst into frenzied activity, just trying to keep her precocious youngsters in sight. I also noticed that several had twins, and it must be hard work to keep an eye on two fawns who are intent on dashing off in totally



'Tigers committing suicide', screamed the headlines in response to the senseless slaughter of over 10 Dudhwa tigers (above). The absurd reports went on to suggest that because of 'over population' some tigers were jumping into wells, others were lying down in front of on-coming trains and still others fighting each other to the death! Poachers, taking advantage of the anti-tiger sentiments of locals, made a killing, literally and figuratively, as they went on the rampage in 1987 and 1988, butchering the highly endangered carnivores for the monetary value of their skins and claws.

With the recent declaration of Dudhwa as a Project Tiger Reserve, the authorities expect that man-animal conflicts will be considerably reduced as tigers (inset) will be able to thrive in undisturbed jungles. This

aspect of Project Tiger's mandate, to reduce tensions between man and beast, is little appreciated by most. The basic question before the nation today is whether forests are perceived as national assets, or not. If so, then the managers of wildlife reserves must surely be given all the political and financial support they need to execute their responsibilities. In reality, they find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place! Locals are encouraged by politicians to break park rules, a cheap way to win popularity. And often, when harsh measures are taken by them against offenders, 'influence' is used to transfer them to less 'sensitive' postings such as social forestry! Such lack of support is the prime reason why people can commit atrocities, such as the one pictured here, and still get away.



Barasingha have the right of way in Dudhwa! The tall grass speaks of excellent protection being afforded to the habitat, but political support still lags far behind what is required.

different directions! Fawn mortality appears to be heavy, for as the days pass, one sees less and less of them. As they grow older the fawns seem to gradually lose their fear of vehicles and can be observed from quite close.

Land of the tiger

The tigers of Dudhwa are possibly second in notoriety only to those of the Sunderbans. It is, in a sense, a deserved reputation. In recent times, more people have probably died here on account of tiger attacks than in any other part of the coun-

try. But the reason for this sad state of affairs lay in old customs and traditions; more specifically the practice of *nikasi*. Under this system the inhabitants of the villages around the Park were permitted to collect thatch grass and firewood for their needs for a few weeks every year. From what I have been given to understand, this meant that several hundreds of bullock carts used to enter the forests and grasslands, people moving into every part of the Park. The consequent violation of the tiger's privacy must have frequently ended in death or injury to the violator. Additionally, outside the Park, a small population

of tigers was known to favour the sugar-cane fields. They came to be known as the *cane tigers* and some certainly had a penchant for human flesh. Others killed or maimed in self-defence. I heard of a case in 1987 in which a woman, while returning after answering a call of nature saw a tiger lying in a cane field. She announced this in the village and a couple of young chaps called her an old fool for mistaking a chital for a tiger and promptly set off to get some venison for dinner. They then lobbed a brick into the cane and the tiger, which was lying up real close, rushed out and swatted them with its paws. They were lucky to escape with minor injuries.

Nikasi has been banned now, and correspondingly there has been a distinct drop in the numbers of man-killing instances. In fact, the last case I heard of from within the Park was in the beginning of 1985. The tigers no longer roam the crop-fields like they used to. Farmers say they see pug marks only very rarely now. In any event locals had virtually declared war on the cane tigers and after poison and bullets did their work, newspaper reports were filled with news of 'tiger suicides'. But it was inevitable. The cane tigers were living on borrowed time anyway, for when man denies the tiger the right to live in its own forests, it's unthinkable that he will share his crop-lands with it!

I had heard hair-raising stories of the blood lust of tigers before I landed up in Dudhwa and I would have been foolish to have been completely unafraid. But I must say that the tigers I came across invariably left the road for me. Only once, the second time I came across a tiger, was I in any way threatened. And that was a tigress with three cubs and on a kill, all the no-nos for tiger sighting! I had unwittingly stopped to measure some grasses near the family. The angry roar when she discovered our presence, the burst of adrenalin that had me diving into the Jeep and the heart-thudding memory of the encounter, however, is something I wouldn't have traded for a hundred less unnerving meetings.

Subsequently, I saw tigers quite frequently (I averaged about one a week). From a cycle, on foot, from the Jeep, from a *machan* and once I spent a slightly uncomfortable five minutes when a tigress balefully glared at me while I was perched barely three metres off the ground on a branch. Those were the only pictures of a tiger that I got after staying five months in tiger country!

The Dudhwa dilemma

If any day can sum up Dudhwa for me it will be February 28, 1988. The previous evening I had watched an immature male florican at Navalkhand till dark, and the next morning I was eager to get back to the spot. Just before reaching Navalkhand, I caught a glimpse of a tiger bounding across the last few metres of the grassland, into the security of deep forest. I stopped for a moment and stared in its direction, screened by some thin saplings. When I caught sight of the striped monarch, I discovered that it too had paused to look back in my direction before disappearing into the forest. What a way to start a day!

I never did see the florican and after a while I proceeded to Dudhwa to spend a relaxed day with the Director. We spoke of the great potential ahead for wildlife in the Park and drove to the rhino enclosure where we saw three of the seven rhinos in great condition. Then we went down to Bankey Tal and did a good bit of birding. We were sitting sipping tea at the Sonaripur rest-house when news came in that a dead tiger had been found just outside the Park. The dark side of Dudhwa had once more reared its head. En route to the spot all I could think of was how desperately we needed to find answers to the contentious man/animal conflicts which threatened to upset the potential of this fine Park.

The smell of putrefication was suffocating. A nearby tree was covered with vultures. The tigress lay where she had crawled in to die, the grass around flattened by the last throes of death. Bloated, lips raised in an ugly snarl, she lay with her fore-paws cut off. Blue flies buzzed around the rotting flesh. Before me lay the remains of one of the *terai's* cane tigers. I had come face to face with Dudhwa's contradictions very often, but never as harshly as this.

It was symbolic, the place she had chosen to die. Around us were tree stumps, mute testimony to the death of forested land. I am informed that around 30,000 hectares of forest has been encroached upon in the *terai* of Lakhimpur district alone. How can any wild animal or habitat take such unholy pressure? Bullets and poison are only the most obvious ways to slaughter animals. Habitat destruction is infinitely more dangerous and inevitable. As I reflect on that terrible sight, my senses reel, and I wonder when it will be that a solution will be found for the Dudhwa dilemma.