

COURTING TIGERS AT THE SUNDERBANS

Spotting striped majesty.

By Murli Menon

Having visited all the tiger reserves in India from Corbett to Simlipal to Kanha, it was time to spot the Royal Bengal tiger in its place of origin: the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve in West Bengal, in the thick mangrove forests that carpet the backwaters where the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers meet the sea.

The entire Sunderbans, covering some 10,000 sq. km of mangrove forest and water (of which some 40 per cent is in India and the rest in Bangladesh), is part of the world's largest delta (80,000 sq. km) formed with the sediments deposited by these rivers. Intricate networks of interconnecting waterways, of which the larger channels are often a mile or more in width and run in a north-south direction, intersect the whole Sunderbans area. In the Indian Sunderbans, the western portion receives some fresh water through the Hoogly-Bhagirathi river system but that portion, designated as the

tiger reserve is essentially land-locked, its rivers having become almost completely cut off from the main freshwater sources over the last 600 years. Thus, waterways in the tiger reserve are maintained largely by the diurnal tidal flow.

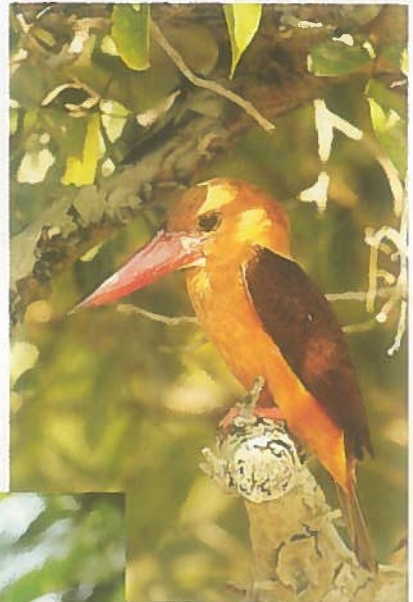
We hired a boat for three nights and camped on the boat which had a large bed in order to sight the elusive tiger. We made several trips from Jharkhali to Sajanakhali and Sonakhali to spot the tiger. However, we were able to spot a group of long-tailed macaques swinging wildly from the thick mangrove branches. Spending a night relaxing on the upper deck of the boat was an unforgettable experience. The sounds of the mangrove forests, the chirping of crickets, the squeaks of the macaques, the full moon night and the expectant wait to hear the growl of the tiger made our boat-cruise an adventure.

Spending the nights on the open deck watching darkness descend on the Sunderbans is soul-stirring! The boat-cruise on the placid waters of

the river is extremely soothing. The calmness, serenity and tranquillity experienced while cruising is meditation in its truest sense.

One has to make several trips to the interiors of the Sunderbans to get a glimpse of the tiger. The best chance to see the tiger is at sunrise or during the late afternoons. Tiger sightings at Jharkhali village have been fairly common in recent times. However, while waiting for the appearance of the tiger, one is able to spot and photograph several long-tailed macaques, that live among the mangroves.

One of the must-see attractions after the novelty of the mangroves have worn off is an early-morning cruise along the mangrove swamps to spot long-tailed macaques that live alongside the mangroves. Located near Jharkhali, these mangroves can be reached by a speed-boat in a matter of minutes. The marine life at the Sunderbans is a rich treasure trove and a fascinating window on the aquatic world. Home to innumerable varieties of fish and



other animals, each fish represents a living proof of being sculpted by nature's hidden hand. As you cruise along the placid waters of the translucent lagoons that flank both sides of one's speed-boat, one hears rustling bushes, which indicate the presence of these long-tailed macaques.

Spotting one is not so easy. They scatter in defence at the sound of the approaching motor boat. A more relaxed technique to spot these gentle creatures is to anchor one's boat by tying it to one of the larger trees that dot the swamps and transfer oneself into a wooden canoe and paddle gently alongside the reedy plants.

However, nature rewards patience. One can switch off one's motor and wait in one's boat for the arrival of these delicate darlings. Feeding of wild monkeys is neither advisable nor expected. Soon, one of the more adventurous ones lands on the branches near one's boat. After keenly observing the boat and its occupants, it squeaks and signals



its mate. Soon, out of nowhere, seven to eight long-tailed macaques land alongside us and swing wildly from one branch to the other. One gets to spot a mother feeding her newborn too.

How to get there: Indian Airlines operates daily flights to Kolkata from New Delhi and Patna. Take the local train from Kolkata (Sealdah station) to Canning Railway Station. One has to halt for the night at Canning at Sunderbans Tourist Lodge (Tariff ₹300). The next day, one must hire a boat (₹3000) or share a boat with other tourists (₹500 per person) to

visit. The boat takes you to Sajnekhali, Jharkhali and Sonakhali. The to and fro boat trip from Canning to Jharkhali, Sonakhali and Sajana-khalikhali costs approximately ₹3000 by chartered boat.

Where to stay:

There are several budget hotels near Canning railway station. Sunderbans Tourist Lodge is a comfortable place to stay. It offers minimum but clean and comfortable rooms to stay in.

Where to eat: There are a few pure vegetarian joints at Canning. The Bihari Vegetarian Dhaba opposite the bus stand offers good dal fry with roti. Fresh cabbage, cauliflower, spinach and carrots are available from the farms around Canning. Tropical fruits like jackfruits, papayas, tender coconuts and small bananas are available in plenty at the Sunderbans.