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A LION'S TALE AT GIR

The Liberation Issue

THE ROAR OF THE LION

A wildlife enthusiast tells us about her thrilling encounters with the king of the jungle and the conservation efforts that brought it back from the brink of extinction in Gujarat's Gir National Park.

By BINDU GOPAL RAO

An Asiatic lion on a walk of pride through the jungles of Gir National Park.

IF THERE'S ONE CONSERVATION success story that's truly put India on the wildlife protection map, it's the one focused on the efforts to save the endangered Asiatic lion. What makes it even more exceptional is that such a story could only manifest in India—after all, the Gir National Park in Gujarat is the only home of this majestic beast in the world!

It's a fact that has captivated me ever since I read about it in my geography school textbook many moons ago. Somehow, along my many travels, I hadn't managed to find my way to this famous reserve—until recently, and the thought of being able to finally see this glorious creature in the wild had me excited. As a person who loves nature, knowing that Gir is a 1,412-kilometre

sanctuary that's also home to several other species made it a wildlife bonanza I couldn't wait to uncover!

THE CALL OF THE JUNGLE

Naturally, I was looking forward to the safari experience the most, but past experiences had taught me that when you venture into the jungle, it's best to go with the flow and without



Ashikra quenches its thirst.



Eager visitors in a safari jeep keep their eyes peeled for animals in the wild.

expectation. Having said that, I admit I prayed hard that my dream of seeing the lion would come true, and tried to wish it into existence with all my might! A four-hour drive from Rajkot Airport brought me to my destination at Aramnesh Gir late in the evening. Set on the periphery of the park, this boutique retreat gave me a great introduction to the topography of the jungle dotted with teak trees. Almost immediately, I saw herds of spotted deer. To add to my excitement, one of the first things I was told is that there have been several instances when the lion has been spotted right outside the gate of the property!

The next morning, a member of staff arrives with tea to my room and alerts me of an alarm call. Sure enough, it's the langur's high-pitched voice that indicates a big cat is on the prowl. I hurry to my terrace and look around for a while, but draw a blank. "The call stopped, so the animal must have changed its course," he tells me. Although disappointed, I quickly brush it away from my mind as my mid-morning safari is not too far away. Soon, I join my guides Ankit Kumar from Aramnesh Gir, Bhavesh from the government's forest department, and jeep driver, Akhtar. Upon entering the



Spotted owllet takes a nap inside a tree hole.

park, I see four peacocks fly past the safari vehicle, as if on cue, one behind the other. I knew there and then that this was going to be a great outing! Akhtar tells me Gir is home to about 300 species of birds. That makes me happy. The more sightings I'm blessed with, the merrier I am!

CONSERVATION CUES

The conversation, but of course, veers towards the park's most prominent resident, the Asiatic lion, and the pride in Akhtar's eyes is unmissable. "We've had no poaching incidents as

there is a lot of patrolling by the forest department and the small population of the semi-nomadic Maldhari tribe that lives in the jungle. The latter work as trackers and keep an eye on any unusual movements and report them to the forest officials." I learn that this is also why the population of lions is now thriving at a remarkable 674 as per the 2020 census. This is especially noteworthy when one considers that the number had once dropped to a mere 50 or so a few decades back. Talk about a roaring success! Crucial to this success has been the unwavering support from both state and central governments, ensuring a steady flow of funding and resources for various conservation initiatives.

AVIAN WONDERS

The inspiring story enthralls me even more (if possible!) and I keep my eyes peeled for any sudden appearance. As we go deeper into the jungle, we are, however, first treated to a grand show of sorts by a trio of birds—two painted storks and a woolly-necked stork all in a line, almost as if they were posing for us. There are more sightings in store—the yellow-throated sparrow, spotted owllets snuggled inside a tree hole, and a *shikra* (type of raptor) quenching its

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A brown fish owl strikes a pose.



A pride of three lions spotted by the writer on her safari experience.



A lioness relaxes with her cubs: their presence is testament to the region's successful conservation efforts.

thirst at a watering hole. My favourite thus far, however, was the brown fish owl. To my delight, I saw two of them perched high on a tree. What a lovely home these birds have: the forest itself is charming, as this is a dry, deciduous landscape, and the ground is covered with the leaves of the teak trees. While enjoying my special environs, I can't help but glance at my watch: we're already past the halfway mark for this particular drive and our star attraction has still to make an appearance!

LION LOVE

Suddenly, the jeep picks up pace and we are racing through the landscape. All at once, it comes to a sharp stop. I can feel my excitement build up and finally hear the words I'd been waiting to hear: "Look, the lions are there!" I focus on the direction in which Bhavesh is pointing, but to my dismay,

can't see anything. A couple of other jeeps have stopped, too, and everyone, except me, seems to have spotted the lions. Akhtar manoeuvres the vehicle and asks me to look between two teak trees. And I finally spot the lions—all three of them! It's hard to explain my emotions at that moment, but a mix of awe, thrill, and an adrenaline rush would perhaps describe them best.

One of the lions was sitting and the other two were lying down. Just as I wondered if they would move, the seated lion got up and took a stroll around one of the trees before sitting again. "He put up a small show for you to let you know that he is around," smiled Ankit. "You're lucky we spotted the lions; we seldom get to see them in the mid-morning safari as they prefer to rest." I nod even as I take innumerable photographs of the regal animals. But then, I put my camera

away and decide to enjoy the sight I had probably manifested for so many years. A pat on the back for me!

THE KING RETURNS

But truly speaking, it's the conservation efforts that deserve the accolades. Eager to know more, I later connected with Dr Singh, IFS, Ex-PCCF, Gujarat State, Gandhinagar and Member, National Board for Wildlife, who tells me about the Nawab of Junagadh's initiatives in the '30s and the Gir Lion Project in the '70s that initially mitigated the loss of the species caused by hunting. Dr Singh is hopeful that the count of lions in the 2025 census will be at least 800. And given the dedication of all involved in this praiseworthy cause, that seems imminently achievable.

As I leave the jungle, the text on a large billboard catches my attention: "Even with their majestic appearance it's the courage and resilience of the Asiatic lions that truly sets them apart." I smile, realising how true these words ring. After all, they're part of a country that has made its mark in the world with its fighting, independent spirit! 🌟



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Concluded

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