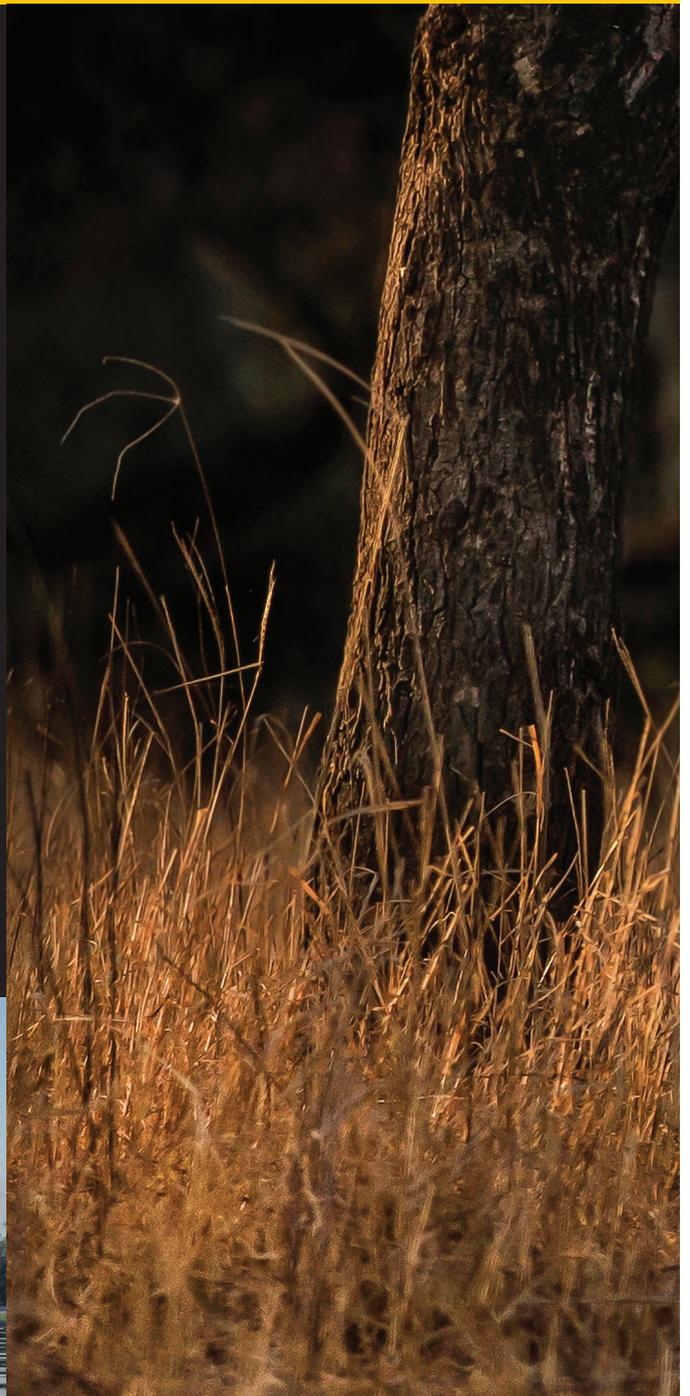


Fly Fishing for Tigers

It might sound crazy, but there are similarities between chasing salt-water game fish and photographing tigers.

by Sekhar Bahadur



Tigress T-83, known as Lightning, is one of the adult daughters of our tigress, T-19. The author with a striped bass and broken fly rod in Westport, Connecticut.



ABHINAV DHAR

“Tiger on the road—behind us!”

When we hear the cry from our guide, we jump on the seats of the Jeep while he does a rapid three-point turn, whips around a gentle bend, and there she is: T-19, a majestic wild tigress also known as Krishna. She walks deliberately but purposefully down the road, and we follow. After perhaps 100 yards she stops, stares intently, then calls. Softer, higher-pitched calls answer from the long grass. She collects two of the three young cubs she left behind to hunt. The third cub calls from deeper in, and the rest of the family heads toward it. The

two cubs in tow are almost hidden by the grass and scurry in single file to keep up with their mother’s long, effortless strides. Soon they all disappear.

I am a fly-fishing junkie but I recently went on my first tiger photo safari in Ranthambore in the Indian state of Rajasthan.

I know more than a hundred fly anglers, but my tiger-watching circle is tiny, consisting of only two people who are both wildlife conservationists and expert amateur photographers—my cousin Abhinav is one of them, and he is internationally recognized for his powerful wildlife images. The groups

in my life—fly anglers and tiger watchers—are entirely separate, but after my stunning first experience with tigers in the wild, I wonder why, because the two passions actually seem very closely related indeed.

Some say there are five stages of enlightenment in a fly fisher's development—catching just a fish, then lots of them, big fish, difficult fish, and finally just being on the water. The late saltwater fly fishing expert, Dr. Joe Mulson, went a step further and said that as he got older he was happy to just close his eyes and remember. I love the sport because it takes me to beautiful remote places with crystal clear waters teeming with life, alongside great friends. It does seem that very experienced anglers tend to gravitate towards the fifth stage of development and take great pleasure from their surroundings and all the life in it. If the quarry presents itself that is an additional blessing.

One of my favorite ways to fish is to cruise around in a small boat looking for schools of baitfish being chased by game fish, such as striped bass,

false albacore, or bluefish on the Atlantic seaboard or Queenfish in the Arabian Sea. The baitfish are often driven to or above the surface, where they are engulfed by our quarry or plucked off the top of the water or out of the air by flocks of diving birds. It is a feeding frenzy above and below the surface. These brief mêlées provide opportunities to catch big fish close to the surface in range of our fly tackle.

The seabirds conserve energy by bobbing on the water when nothing much is happening, but a few sentinels aloft keep watch. When the action begins, the whole flock takes flight, attracting more sharp-eyed birds, which converge from all directions, their raucous cries echoing across the water.

We too often conserve energy, cruising relatively slowly, looking for signs of our quarry on the water and using binoculars to spot concentrated bird activity. When we see action, we race toward the birds, bouncing across the waves and holding on for dear life. Many times, other boats arrive as well. Once we reach the blitz, we slow down and get into position. The anglers scramble, usually to the bow, sometimes the stern.

Meanwhile the adrenaline is flowing, the boat



ABHINAV DHAR

Because the park borders many densely populated areas, there are inevitable clashes between tigers, humans, and livestock—these clashes are rare but tend not to end well.

captain shouts instructions, and we are all immersed in the frenzy. As quickly as we can, we cast our streamers into the boiling water while the captain watches the birds and blitz in order to keep pace with the fray. If we are lucky, fish will attack our flies and then peel off line—sometimes a couple of hundred yards worth—and bend the long and delicate fly rod to an almost impossible angle. When we are even luckier, we bring a powerful fish to the boat before releasing it.

Many of my fly fishing brethren, just like tiger photographers, are passionate conservationists, and while none of the fish I mentioned above are endangered, some of our other target fish, such as some species of tuna, are under pressure. Few wild creatures, though, are as endangered as tigers are.

Ranthambore, formerly the hunting grounds of the Maharajah of Jaipur, covers 109 square miles and is home to around 67 Bengal tigers. There are approximately only 3,900 wild tigers worldwide.

Ranthambore has almost 2 percent of them, but sightings are still by no means easy. Ranthambore is forested, sparsely during the dry season but lushly with green vegetation during and shortly after the summer monsoon



Against rules, a farmer is inside the park with his livestock. Farmers are compensated for livestock killed inside the park by tigers but not outside. (Above) A langur monkey, like the one pictured, helped lead our guide and driver to T-19.



BOTH BY SEHKAR BAHADUR

rains. The more than 1,000-year-old Ranthambore Fort (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) looms over the park, which contains many beautiful old Mughal buildings, several lakes, and many species of resident and migratory birds, fish, and fearsome marsh crocodiles. In addition to the tigers, and the sambar and chital deer they prey on, the park also is home to langur monkeys, sloth bears, wild boar, striped hyenas, leopards, and several smaller cat species, all living amidst beautiful old Banyan trees. It is a wild-life paradise.

Because tigers are so critically endangered, the park managers at Ranthambore watch over them very closely. The forest guards patrol on foot with only a stick, their wits, and their tree-climbing skills to protect them. Each adult tiger is identified by a unique T number, and because they are territorial, the tigers you see in Ranthambore's 10 zones are easily identifiable. Many of the park's most charismatic or notorious tigers are well known to wildlife lovers around the world by both their T numbers and the evocative names given to them, like Machli (T-16); her daughter, Krishna (T-19); Ustad (T-24); Noor (T-39); Sultan (T-72); and Krishna's formidable daughter, Arrowhead (T-84). When the park's tigers have an issue, the authorities sometimes deploy veterinarians or otherwise intervene. For example, during our visit, a guide reported that a tiger cub in Zone 6 was unwell. The park rangers were on the scene within half an hour, and park management promptly closed the sector to tourists in order to reduce stress on the cub and its mother.

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Tigers

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Because the park borders many densely populated areas, there are inevitable clashes between tigers, humans, and livestock—these clashes are rare but tend not to end well. The authorities work hard to encourage coexistence, but I am not sure all their policies provide incentives for the park's neighbors to steer clear. For example, I learned that farmers are compensated for livestock killed inside the park by tigers but not if their animals are killed outside. During our time there, we came across a farmer and his herd of water buffalo well inside the park.

For the most part, tigers have flourished here. The park's policies have led to an increase in Ranthambore's tiger numbers from around 18 when it was brought under national protection in 1973 to its current 67. In addition, several other tigers were exported to another park that had been ravaged by poaching. Ranthambore is in a sense a victim of its own success and may soon have tiger-capacity issues.

Tiger spotters often visit the park in 4-wheel drive vehicles, each with an English-speaking guide and a driver. There are two drives per day, one beginning in the early morning and one in the mid-to-late afternoon—each drive takes place in daylight. Tigers are solitary nocturnal ambush hunters and they are fiercely territorial, so they are often truly spread out over the whole park in camouflaging vegetation. The tigers also might well be asleep when we are in the park. We therefore usually need to go looking for them, and it is very hard and uncertain work, closely resembling the salt water fly fisher's routine.

As with fly fishing, a tiger safari begins with strategizing based on where tigers have been seen and how they are likely be behaving. The first visual clues are often paw prints on the dusty roads, which tigers often use as travel paths of least resistance. The guides and drivers can tell whether the tiger is male or female, how recently the prints were made, and of course in which direction it is traveling. The next clue, just as in fly

fishing, often comes from above.

Gray langur monkeys, with adult weights of around 24 pounds for females and nearly 40 for males, are normally not worth the energy a tiger needs to expend actively to hunt them (especially as tigers don't like to climb trees), but tigers can and will snack on them when opportunity presents itself. The smaller and more nimble leopards, who are excellent climbers, do regularly prey on the monkeys, and the langurs loathe and fear all the big cats. Often perched high in the trees, if they see predators, the langurs react with a distinctive warning call. When the guides and drivers hear it, they try to determine where the calling monkeys are looking and race in that direction at full speed, bouncing over uneven ground while we try to avoid being ejected.

The guides and drivers also have helping eyes, ears, and noses on the ground. Sambar and chital deer, the tigers' primary prey species, also emit their own warning calls when they detect the big cats. The guides use them to home in on the tiger and find a place on the road to intercept it. Chitals and the monkeys are often found together, as the monkeys' excellent eyesight and the chitals' fine sense of smell are complementary warning systems, and the chitals often eat fruit dropped by the langurs. Warning calls from a large langur monkey patriarch that saw tiger cubs, and then a sambar that then detected the tigress herself, led our guide and driver to T-19. Since seeing tigers is not easy and visitors leaving disappointed is not good for business, the guides shared information freely and cooperated, similar to the way fly fishers sometimes network with cellphones. Rugby scrums of jeeps often jostled for position at a potential sighting point, just like fly fishing skiffs on a busy fall weekend off Montauk, Long Island.

When the tiger does make an appearance, as with T-19, the guide usually sees it before anyone else, directs his guests to it, and urges them to take their pictures now! Just as fly fishers' hearts race and throats constrict while we fumble with our equipment when a

blitz explodes on the surface, tiger photographers do a similar butterfingered scramble to arrange camera straps, lens covers, power switches, photo modes, and focus while attempting to get that one great shot before the tiger and the fleeting opportunity disappear.

Another thing that tiger chasers seem to have in common with fly fishers is a fondness for expensive equipment that I suspect they may not always have the skills to make full use of. Some chasers just use smartphones, but I saw one gleaming vehicle from an upscale hotel full of American tourists in spotless safari gear, bristling with shiny new cameras, and bazooka sized telephoto lenses complete with stabilizing monopods. Their mobile artillery platform reminded me of the photographers' box at the Centre Court at Wimbledon juxtaposed with a motorized re-enactment of the Battle of Jutland.

It also brought to mind some comments by Flip Pallot, the legendary salt-water fishing guide and angler famed for his beautiful fly casting.

"Life in my world comes down to the last 40 feet...Many anglers have amassed wealth that gives them the opportunity to make a fishing trip. They go to their local pro shop and buy all the right clothes, rods, reels, lines, and flies. They step onto a skiff, resplendent with all the right clothing and tackle. The guide poles them within 40 feet of a tailing bonefish. Sadly, their credit card won't take them that last 40 feet...They neglected to bring the skills to get them that last step to the bonefish.... The last 40 feet is the barometer of what you've been willing to invest." ("Flip Pallot: A Spiritual Guide to the Importance of the Last 40 Feet," Sarah Grigg, *Fly Fisherman*. June 27, 2017.)

Perhaps the well-equipped tourists I saw covered their last 40 feet with skill and aplomb and went home with photographs that looked like my cousin's. Taking pictures of tigers even if you do find them and manage to get your equipment organized, is not easy. Like tarpon, tigers move deceptively fast. Amateurs like me tend to frantically snap away at first sight, panning as the animal moves. The result is

many blurred, mis-framed, or cut-off pictures. My specialty was getting splendid pictures of tiger bodies with the head hidden behind an unanticipated tree trunk or other obstacle. Expert photographers like my cousin anticipate and ambush.

Tigers even in Ranthambore are not nearly as plentiful as some of the saltwater fish we pursue, and the closest fly-fishing equivalent may be the elusive, finicky, and generally infuriating permit, which is famed for regularly disappointing its pursuers. At our beautiful hotel set in stunning 20-acre gardens, several would-be tiger spotters were in various states of slump-shouldered dependence over their failure to spot a tiger, and the wonderfully hospitable hotel management team was wringing its hands over this sad state of affairs. Some of our fellow guests were not very far along the tiger spotting equivalent of the five-stage fly fishing enlightenment scale I mentioned earlier, and were it seemed ignoring the wondrous wildlife and beautiful scenery all around us. I got the impression from some of

them that they had nailed their colors to the mast, announcing far and wide that they were off to “see tigers,” not to experience a beautiful wild place and an ancient culture.

There are many parallels between these two not obviously similar pursuits. They both take place in stunning surroundings and involve motorized chases helped by clues from other wildlife. Both involve guides and vehicle operators, with fishing often combining the roles and tiger spotting separating them. One features a momentary mechanical capture, and both usually involve photographs. Both sets of devotees tend to be environmentalists. Inexperience is punished and graft and preparation are rewarded. Finally, they are both wonderful experiences.

As long as you enjoy the whole picture, practice, learn your craft, and remember you are not in an aquarium or a zoo, I do very highly recommend trying both saltwater fly fishing and tiger photography. If you already enjoy one activity, I think you will like the other. Tight

lines, and long may the tigers burn bright! ■

Sekhar Bahadur lives in London and Greenwich, Connecticut. He holds advanced fly casting instructor qualifications from Fly Fishers International and the Game Angling Instructors' Association. He and his wife, Monique, have two grown daughters.

If You Go

Ranthambore is approximately four hours by train from New Delhi to Sawai Madhopur, from which it is only a few minutes' drive to the park and the hotels near it that visitors use. The park is a 7-hour drive from New Delhi and approximately three hours from Jaipur.

Sekhar and his wife stayed at the Oberoi Vanyavilas Resort (oberoihotels.com/hotels-in-ranthambhore-vanyavilas-resort).

Tiger safaris can be arranged through hotels or directly with guides such as Bitu Shekawat (+91 96943 80212).

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