

SOME hillside and riverain forests in India are singularly blessed by nature, and rich in their variety of trees and ground plants, and the wild beasts, birds and lesser animals that live in them. Among the most favoured of such tracts are parts of the Western Ghats, in spite of the sustained human invasion and exploitation they have suffered over the past 50 years; they hold quite a few plants and animals that are to be found nowhere else—for instance, besides some birds, the Lion-tailed Macaque and the Nilgiri Langur (our only two black monkeys) and the Nilgiri Tahr (the so-called "ibex") among the larger mammals, that are only

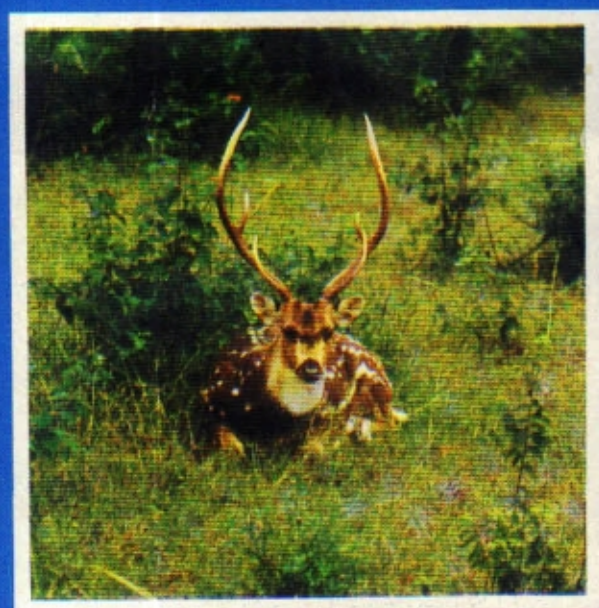
to be found in the southern reaches of these ghats.

The north-eastern slopes of the Nilagiri range, constituting southern Wynad, are perhaps the most affluent wildlife area of the Western Ghats—it is by no mere coincidence that the major sanctuaries of three neighbouring states occupy this tract, in a confluence—the recently set up Wynad sanctuary of Kerala, the Mudumalai sanctuary of Tamil Nadu and Bandipur (now part of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve of Karnataka, at the moment of writing the only southern reserve of Project Tiger). The Bandipur Tiger Reserve (the southernmost forests of Karnataka)

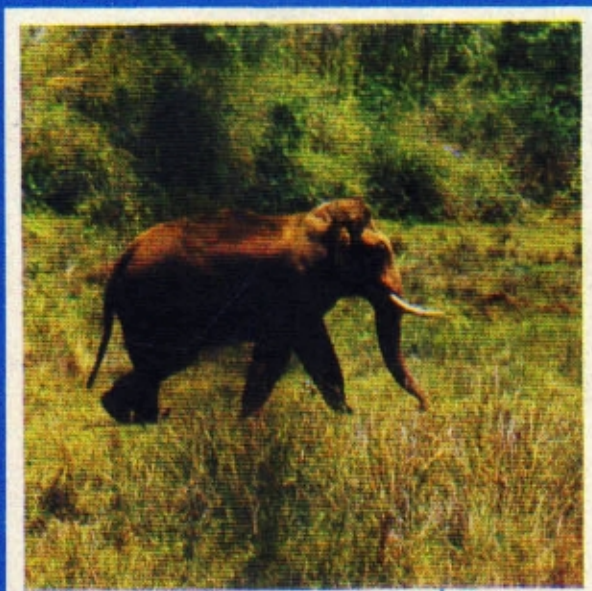
cannot boast any of the animals mentioned above as being exclusive to the Western Ghats, but is nevertheless remarkable for its wildlife opulence, particularly the 60 square-kilometre area of Bandipur proper, now the main part of the Tourism Zone of the tiger reserve. Nowhere along the ghats can wild elephants, gaur and chital be seen in such numbers and from such close quarters as in Bandipur, and there is a reason for this local faunal richness. Elephants and gaur range far, shifting feeding grounds periodically as seasonal vegetative changes and their requirements of cover, fodder and water dictate, and like most forest animals

## Burning Bright at Bandipur

*Text and photographs by  
by M. Krishnan*



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1. The redsilk-cotton in bloom, *Bombax ceiba*, with a jungle myna sipping the nectar.
2. A chital stag lying down to rest.
3. A wild tusker in musth; this bull, in his prime, is a typical "Koomeriah", of the finest build according to indigenous traditions.



Burning Bright at Bandipur

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they like fairly level ground, sheltered water sources, and varied fodder and cover: other parts of the north-eastern slopes of the Nilgiris, descending gradually from their precipitous tops to the plains below, also offer these amenities, for instance Kargudi and Theppakkadu in the Mudumalai sanctuary, but Bandipur (though it also features some hillocks) is notable for its open forests and glades, and more or less level ground, and has many pools inside the forests. The river Moyar, forming its southern boundary, is fordable in many places, so that the animals, strongly attracted to Bandipur, have no difficulty in getting into it from around. For many decades now Bandipur has been entirely free from forestry operations, a unique feature shared by few other

sanctuaries, and the carefully laid out motor roads intersecting the forests here provide adequate interspaces between the roads for the animals to retreat into, if they wish to: furthermore, these roads do not lie along, or across, the established trek routes of elephants and gaur, as roads in parts of the Mudumalai sanctuary do.

The Wynad in and around Bandipur has a long and chequered history, and is one of the few parts of India where human attempts to colonise the forests have been abandoned. For centuries the Wynad was disputed territory, in which Kerala, and the old Madras Presidency and Mysore State, had interests: local chieftains held brief sway here, and pioneering coffee planters invaded the tract adventurously — vestiges of these early plantations and of

more ambitious attempts at human settlements deep inside the forests, are features of this tract which must be of absorbing interest to historians and anthropologists. Chief among the aborigines of the Wynad are the Kurubas, divided into several distinct sects — G. P. Sanderson gives a fascinating account of them as they were a hundred years ago — and they are still there, scattered in small colonies, no longer living off the forest but turning to labour and regular employment reluctantly.

With this necessary prologue we may go on to an account of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve as it is today. However the main point sought to be made here chiefly concerns only a part of the present reserve, the old Bandipur area in the Tourism Zone, and some basic facts about its past

- 4. *Giant Squirrel*: one of the largest and much the handsomest of squirrels, diurnal and typical of our mixed deciduous hill-forests.
- 5. *The Indian Laburnum*, *Cassia fistula*.
- 6. *Indian python*, the so-called 'rock python'.
- 7. *Chital* at a forest pool in Bandipur.
- 8. *A forgotten god* — rescued from an abandoned human settlement reclaimed by the forest, at Bandipur.
- 9. *A Kuruba belle*: Kurubas are the authentic aborigines of the area, and there are many sects of them. This girl is a *Jane-Kuruba* — a honey-gathering sect.
- 10. *Tigers*, being so very nocturnal and shy of men, are seldom seen by day at Bandipur, but their unmistakable pugs on the ground are evidence of their being very much there. (Picture not taken in Bandipur).



should be set out first. This is how Bandipur came into being, as a sanctuary.

As early as 1941 Mysore set up the ambitious 800 sq. km. Venugopala Wild Life Park, extending from the river Moyar (the natural southern boundary) to Gundlupet in the north, including the 1450 m. high Gopalswamy Betta, atop which is the shrine of Venugopala, tutelary deity of the Maharajas of Mysore. Bandipur was the sanctum sanctorum of the park, being its most favoured faunal area. I have seen Bandipur in those early days and can testify to its wildlife richness and the fact that visitors to it were comparatively few and far between. However, it was lamentably true that occasionally royal shikar was indulged in right within the heart of the preserve.

Today, with a vast Core Area added (which includes 'Moolehole and Kalkere, noted for their magnificent forests), Bandipur lends its name to the 690 sq. km. reserve of Project Tiger. Forestry and other human activities have been stopped within the Core — there is a measure of poaching from across the Kerala border near Kalkere, but steps have been taken to eliminate this.

It is true that the animals of the Bandipur area are also there in this Core, but they are scattered over its vast forests and do not sojourn or reside in such concentrations in this hilly terrain as they do in level, open-forested Bandipur. Gopalswamy Betta and the waterspread of the Kabini reservoir are also in the Tourism Zone of the tiger reserve, but they are still undeveloped and Bandipur virtually

constitutes the entire zone now. This was inevitable. Bandipur is so readily accessible by road, being only 80 km. from Mysore city and only a little farther away from Ootacamund : the lodges and staff-quarters already there have been added to form a campus providing varied board and lodge to a host of visitors, and the old grid of motor roads passing close by the forest pools offers instant scope for organising van-rides to enable the visitors to see the abundant wildlife.

Thinking of Bandipur, I am reminded of Shelley's reference to Chatterton and Sidney — "the inheritors of unfulfilled renown". Neither when it was proclaimed a sanctum sanctorum, nor now when it is a diametrically opposed tourism centre, has its wonderful natural potential for faunal



11. The Common Langur is the typical forest monkey of the reserve. This one is eating a *Grewia tiliacifolia* twig, perched in a fork on a *Terminalia* tree.

12. The bonnet monkey is seldom seen deep inside the forest at Bandipur but is not uncommon along the main bus road passing through the reserve.

13. An old lone tusker browsing by the roadside.

14. (2 Pix) A herd of elephants entering Nanjanapur-katte after reconnoitring the surroundings, and rushing out of the pool in panic minutes later on hearing the sound of van.

*conservation and carefully-planned wildlife display been realised, and during neither phase of its history have the animals been free from vexatious human interference.*

I am not just carping. I know that since it became a reserve of Project Tiger, which recognises the importance of environmental protection in the Tourism Zone as well, the effort to minimise human disturbance to the animals at Bandipur has been sincere and sustained. Cattle grazing here, tolerated for years as an unavoidable evil, has now been effectively checked, no small achievement in itself. But the loud tourists in the vans still disturb the animals and, much worse, it has not been possible to prevent some people (unconnected officially with the reserve) from invading the forests on foot.

For close on thirty years, as opportunity offered, I have studied the effects of human activities on wild animals in forests all over India, and can say that the two things that panic and unsettle the animals, and at times lead to abnormal aggression by them, are hunting and trapping, and frequent disturbance by humanity, *especially by men on foot*. This is specially consequential in elephant forests, and Bandipur is one of the most important elephant forests of India. It is a real pity that with so much achieved to assure success in conservation, and with such long traditions as a sanctuary, human disturbance still obtains at Bandipur, though the much more difficult problems of royal shikar and cattle grazing have been solved. My photographs will prove this disturbance more effectively

than words can. Four years ago, I was in a camouflaged treetop hideout overlooking Nanjanapur-katte, hoping to get pictures of elephants as they waded into the pool in a typical semicircular formation. A herd came up and stopped behind the cover of vegetation fringing the pool, and a detachment from it got into the water, keeping to the shallows. I was waiting for the elephants to wade deeper in, when the rest of the herd would also enter the pool, when suddenly the elephants in the water hurled themselves out of it as if ten thousand devils were behind them and rushed into the forest, taking the herd with them. A moment later I heard the sound of an oncoming van, and later still saw the van, full of gesticulating, loud visitors, stop momentarily on the road





near the pool to see if there were any animals at the water, and then proceed onwards. The quicker ears of the elephants had heard the approach of the van earlier than mine, and their experience of human disturbance at pools had panicked them. The photograph of a big cow demonstrating at a van needs no explanatory text.

But of course Bandipur has many virtues, besides easy access and stay facilities, that should also be mentioned. As explained already, all the animals that are there elsewhere in the reserve can be seen here more plentifully and readily, except the jackal, strangely absent from the area, though it is uncommon elsewhere, too, in the reserve. There are riding elephants available at Bandipur for those who wish to study the flora and fauna

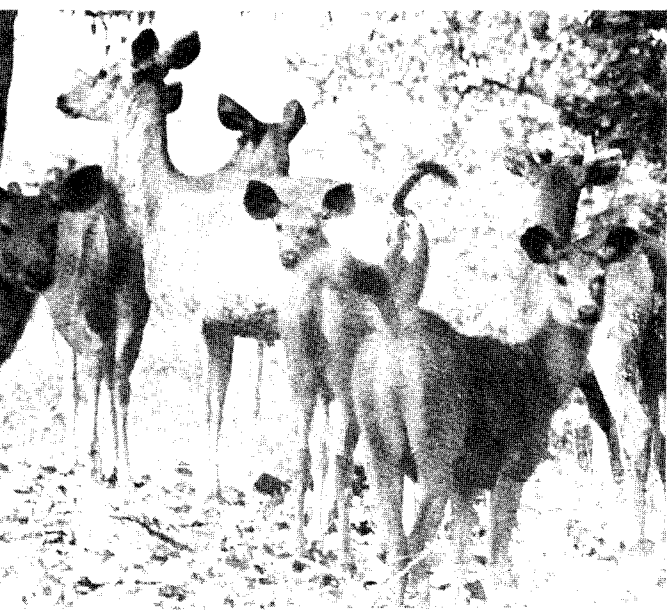
inside the forests. The Core Area is closed to visitors.

In the Western Ghats, dominantly ever-green forests occur in patches rather than in continuous spreads, and the forests of the tiger reserve are best described as mixed deciduous, attaining a truly magnificent stature in places (as near Kalkere) and most open in Bandipur proper, though here too there are lofty rosewoods and other noble trees, for no forestry operations have been permitted here for long. Short grass glades are typical of Bandipur — elsewhere, as at Moolehole, there are belts of tall grass.

Two trees characteristic of the Wynad forests, the *gante-mara* (*Schrebera swietenoides*) and the *udi-mara* (*Radermachera xylocarpa*) whose white flowers are so

conspicuous in summer, are common in Bandipur. Other notable flowering trees are the Indian laburnum, the flame of the forest, and the red silk-cotton.

The ground vegetation is no less colourful, especially after the rains. It features many plants of the family of the hibiscus, among them a conspicuous yellow flowered shrub, *Decaschistia crotonifolia*. The purple flowered *Argyreia cuneata*, typical of the Wynad forests and very common in Bandipur, belongs to the morning glory family, usually given to twiners and not to shrubs. With the north-east monsoon, about late October, the forest floor is decked with masses of crimson and yellow where the wild lily, *Gloriosa superba*, is in flower, and in the clearings ground orchids are in bloom, chief among them the

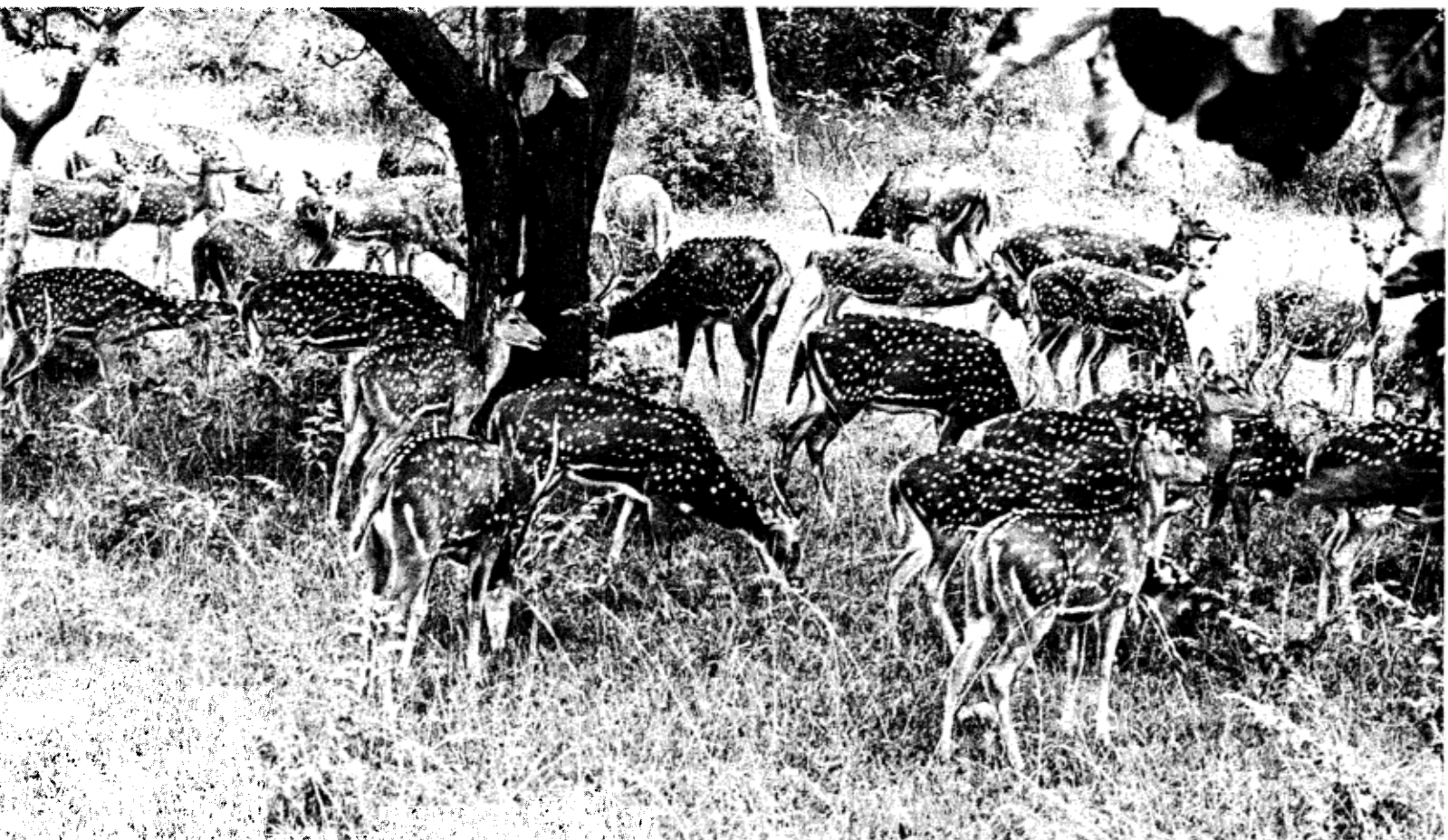


15. A group of sambar hinds and subadults. The sambar is not really a gregarious deer.

17. Part of a herd of chital grazing in a forest glade.



16. A massive bull gaur. Gaur, the tallest and handsomest of the world's wild oxen, attain their best development in India along the Western Ghats.



opulent, white, sweet-scented *Platanthera susannae*.

Instead of listing the more important trees of the reserve, it may be said that many plants of the hibiscus family and allied families such as *Kydia calycina*, and species of *Grewia*, and of the bean family, are features of the vegetation of the reserve, and that their fodder value to the wild herbivores is second only to the grasses.

The Common Langur is the typical forest monkey of the reserve. Only one other monkey, the familiar bonnet monkey is to be found here, mainly along the roads and near human settlements. The tiger, of course, is very much there in the reserve, and there seem to be quite a few in the Core Area too, a most heartening sign. With the strict protection now accorded, tigers have

increased in numbers here — formerly they were much shot in the area, and there was even a man-eater, whose shabby and mangy-looking skin with mounted head now finds a place in one of the lodges. How are the mighty fallen! Leopards are there, though not often seen, and they seem much given to tree climbing here.

Dhole (the so-called "wild dog") are almost common in Bandipur, and keep a salutary check on the deer and the pig. The Common Mongoose is really common in the glades around the campus — deeper inside the forest one may come across the powerful, thickset, dark striped-necked mongoose, the largest of the tribe. Hyenas are seldom seen, but are there. The sloth bear, once not uncommon here, is almost rare now.

The handsome giant squirrel was a familiar feature of Bandipur some years ago but is less in evidence now. I cannot say why it has declined, but it certainly needs effective protection. Porcupines, hares and field rats are the other common (and nocturnal) rodents of the area.

Elephants are the feature of the reserve, and are to be found all over it, but are specially common in Bandipur. The elephant is not resident but sojourns for days, even weeks at times, in Bandipur. I have always felt amazed at the tolerance of human disturbance they display here — but there is an end to any animal's tolerance as has been proved, unfortunately, more than once at Bandipur. Herds with very young calves, parties, and lone bulls may all be seen around the forest pools,



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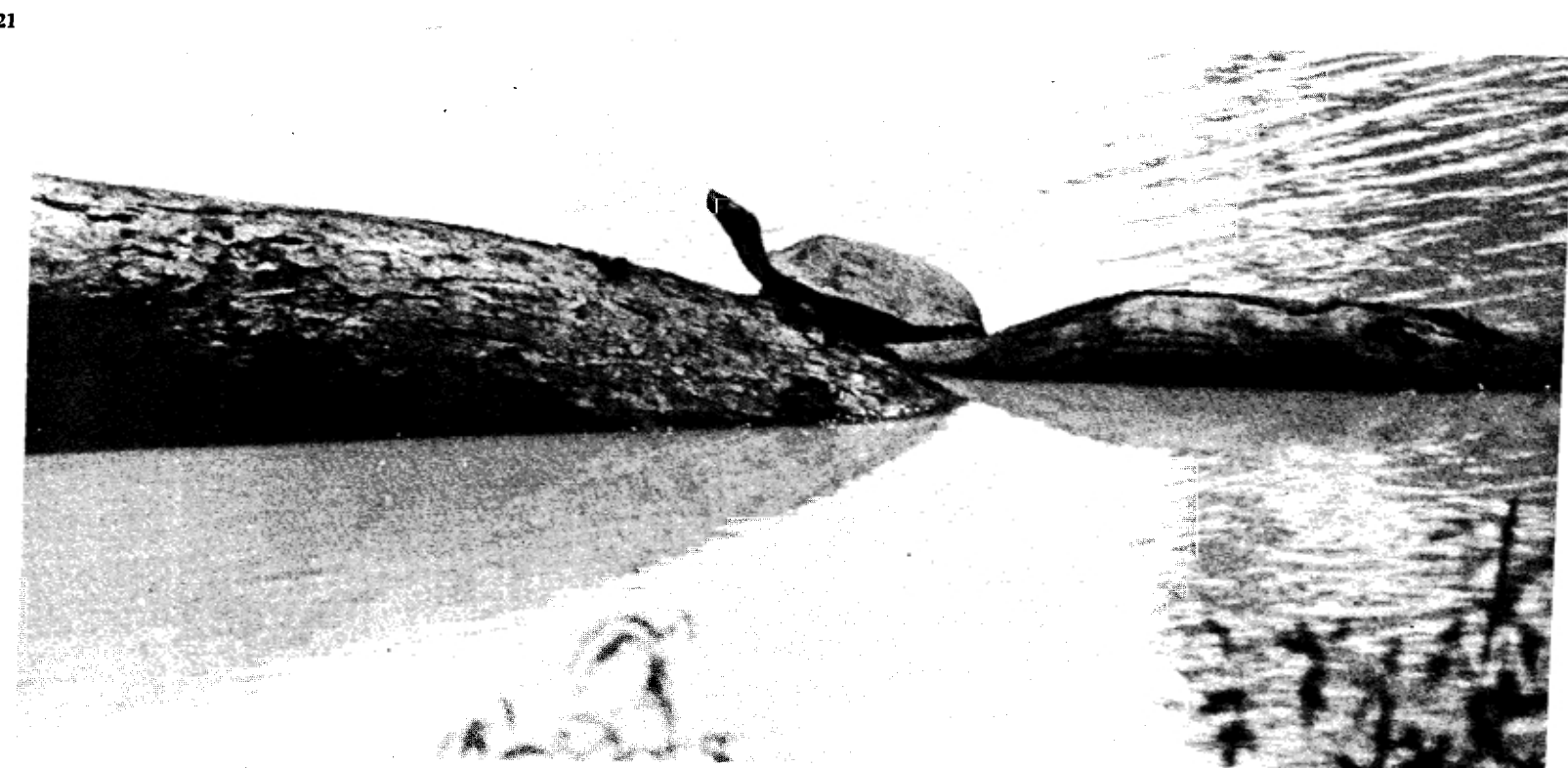


18. Dawn. A peacock through the morning mist. The ground-mist is quite heavy in October, and the peafowl, roosting atop tall trees, wait for the sun before leaving the treetop.

19. The tiger of the treetops — the Crested Hawk-Eagle. An old female.

20. Malabar Grey Hornbill feeding on the fruits of *Machilus macrantha*. The female has a distinctive orange beak — the male has a dark grey beak.

21. A pond tortoise : almost every pool in the reserve has its own resident tortoises.





and there is never any need to get really close to watch them. The elephant is the largest land mammal in existence and truly stupendous in size, and anyone who has to get really close to watch it needs to have his eyes examined.

Gaur were for long almost an equally important feature of Bandipur as elephants, but with the rinderpest epidemic of 1968 they disappeared altogether from here, and are now coming back slowly. Gaur attain their best development anywhere in the Wynad and Kerala.

Sambar, chital, muntjac and mouse-deer represent the deer of the reserve. The sambar I have seen here do not attain the size they do elsewhere, but I was told in places, as near Kalkere, they come really big. The solitary muntjac is oftener heard than seen (its alarm-call is very like the bark of a mastiff with a sore-throat, and is reiterated — hence the name, barking deer) and the dinky little mouse-deer, so small that the ground vegetation hides it as it goes tripping along, is seldom seen. Chital are there in hundreds in Bandipur proper, and at night invade the campus : few locations offer greater scope for studying these deer, and with enhanced protection they are now to be found in large stag parties (consisting of from 30 to 100 stags, mainly in the last stages of velvet, with perhaps a few old hinds) as they are now also to be seen in some other tiger reserves, Corbett Park, for instance.

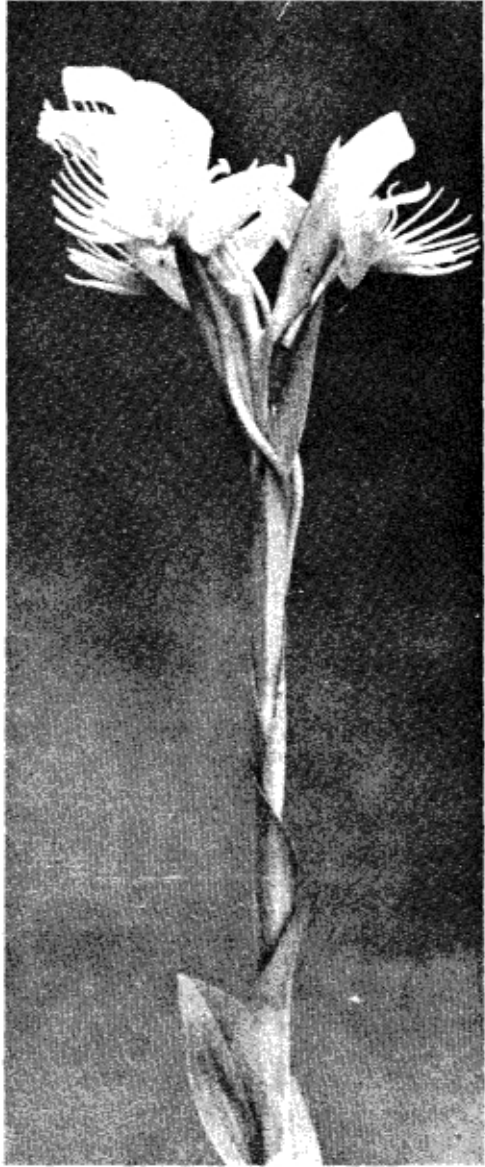
Pig, even in regular sounders, are not uncommon, but do not attain the enormous size in the reserve that they do in other parts of Karnataka.

The avifauna consists typically of woodland birds — drongos (including the magnificent racket-tailed drongo), minivets, woodshrikes, barbets, woodpeckers, hornbills, trogons, hill-mynas and parakeets (especially the bluewinged parakeet). Spotbills and the Lesser Whistling Teal may be seen in the larger tanks — Tavarakatte, for instance. Owls, the crested hawk-eagle and the crested serpent-eagle are the main birds of prey, and whitebacked vultures and perhaps a king vulture may be seen near kills.

Peafowl are very common, and when some trees fruit (*Cordia myxa*, for example) are almost as arboreal as they are ground birds. Other ground birds include the grey junglefowl, spurfowl, the grey partridge and quails.

The reptilian life features the python, very much at home here where there are so many rocky hillocks and forest pools — at Moolehole there are mugger in the streams. Every little pool has its own population of pond tortoises — I believe it is *Geoemyda trijuga* that is found here.

The lesser life, the insects, arachnids and the like, are plentiful here, as elsewhere, soon after the rains. However, they are very much the concern of specialists.



22. More opulent than a lily and with a fragrance more alluring than a rose's — the big, white ground orchid, *Platanthera susannae*.

23. The Flame of the Forest, *Butea monosperma*, bursts into red bloom early in summer.

