

India's Wild Animals: A Great Heritage

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MOST people may be astonished to know that India can boast of some 500 different species of wild mammals. That mythical creature, the 'average man' and for that matter the 'average Indian' is not likely to think or know of more than two dozens of them. Yet, India is as rich in wild animals as any country in the world and richer than most. And a number of our animals are peculiarly our own: some others (like the sambar) are also found in the other countries of south-east Asia, but attain their best development here, and some with a wide range in Asia are best known in India, like the tiger.

Today, we start our annual national Wild Life Week, which is observed to conserve and to know more about the wonderful richness of a part of our great heritage of nature, our wild mammals. Perhaps a comprehensive way of enriching our knowledge is to list the main species in taxonomical order, leaving out a great many animals that are uncommon or little known, or only close cousins of better-known beasts, with notations marking why some of the species listed are specially important. Such a listing, however, presumes a sound knowledge of the species listed on the part of the reader, and also a certain familiarity with their distribution and affinities. Therefore a more descriptive and selective account is attempted here, which has to be necessarily less tersely comprehensive.

We need not consider the animals of the Himalayas and of the sub-Himalayan tracts, since they are more or less peculiar to that region within Indian limits. The account of our animals

given here is a general account of the animals of the peninsula, and points out the notable features of the members of each group described (some groups, like the bats, the insectivores, and the marine and aquatic mammals have been left out), such as their being exclusively Indian, or being now on the verge of extinction, or having a limited range, or being found over most parts of the peninsula.

The Ancestors

We have only one ape, the hoolock gibbon found in the hills of Assam with a range extending into Burma, but we have many distinctive monkeys, all either macaques (most of them red-faced, thickset in build, and with cheek pouches) or langurs (taller, longer tailed, and with no cheek pouches, and all dark-faced). The bonnet monkey of India south of the Godavari (the commonest monkey of the region) and the liontailed monkey of the evergreen sholas of the southern hills (one of our two black monkeys—it never had a wide distribution and is now quite rare, having been systematically hunted down) are the exclusively Indian macaques, one with a very wide distribution and the other with a singularly limited range. Our other macaques include the rhesus, the familiar bandar of the north, perhaps the best known of our monkeys outside India, and a few short-tailed macaques found in the dense forests of Assam—all of these are also to be found in Burma and beyond. The Nilgiri langur (the other black monkey of the country) is also an inhabitant of the sholas of the southern hills and is found nowhere else; it is also much hunted, but is less rare than

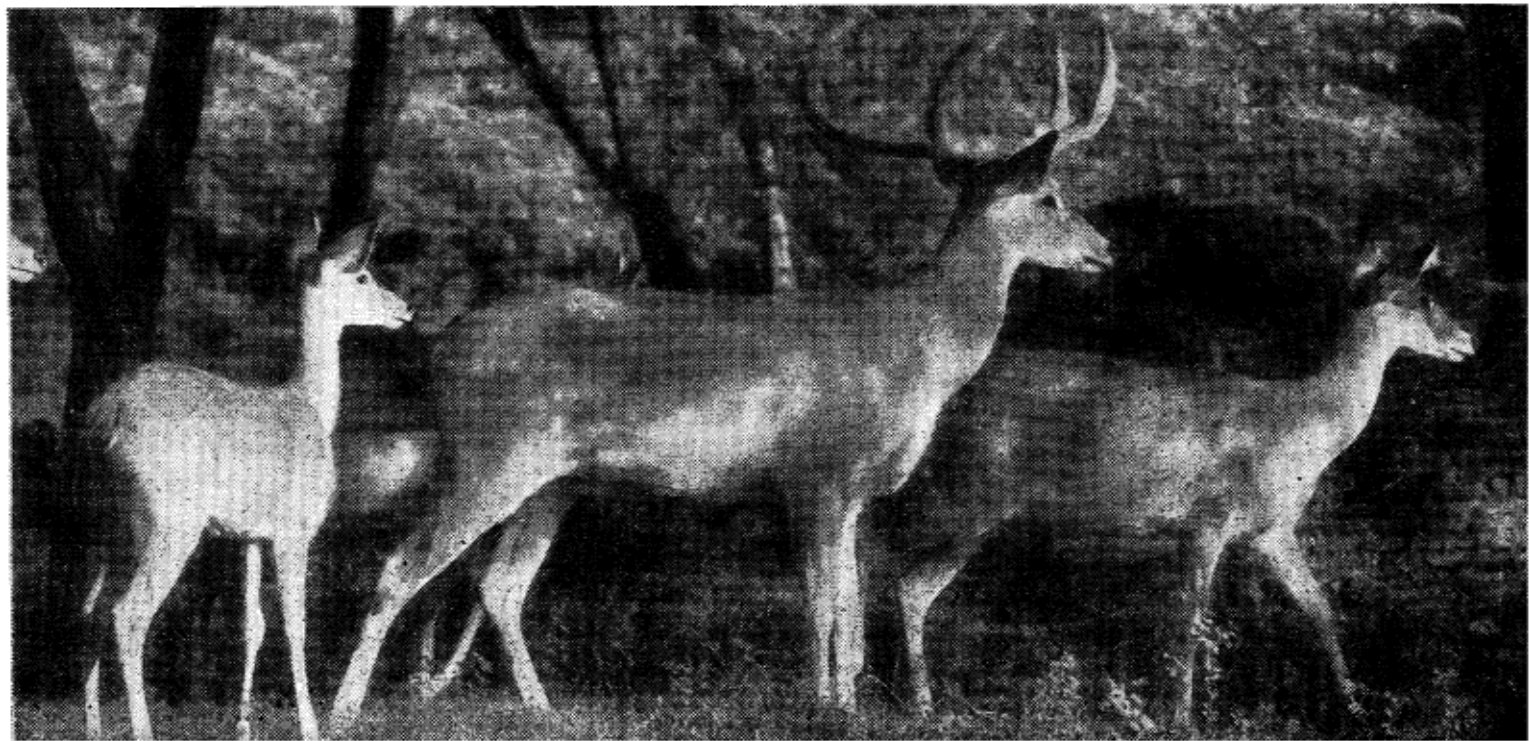
the lion-tailed monkey. The common langur, grey bodied and with a flat black face and black hands and feet, is the only monkey of the country with an all-India distribution, right from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari; it is peculiarly Indian, and though a forest animal, is well known.

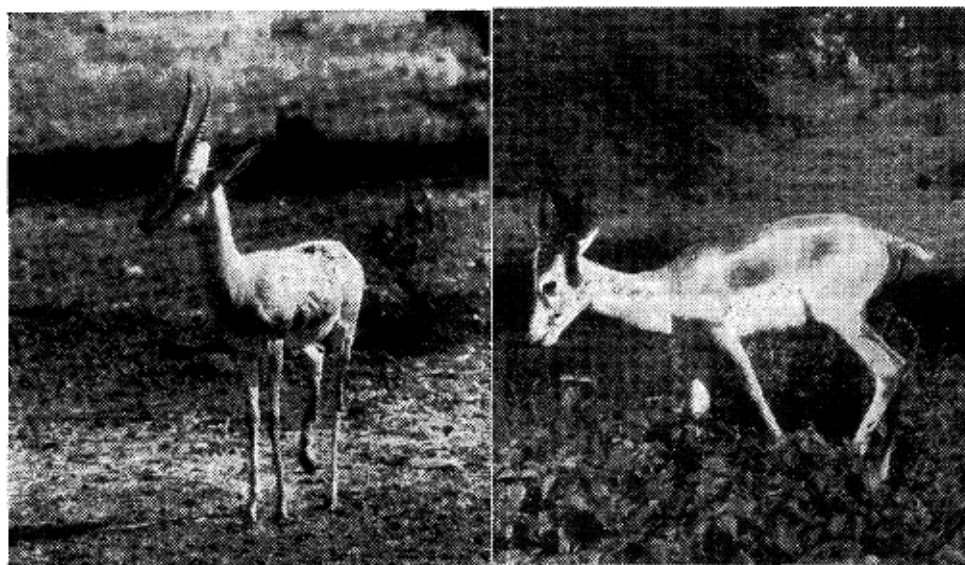
We have more cats than any other country, no less than 9 lesser cats (of the genus *Felis*) and 5 greater cats (the lion, the tiger, the leopard, the snow leopard and the clouded leopard) even leaving out the cheetah, which became extinct in India within the past 30 years. All these are found in other countries as well, some elsewhere in Asia, and some (like the jungle cat and the leopard) in Africa as well as Asia. However the Asiatic lion, the lion of the Bible and of Omar Khayyam, is a sub-species distinct from the African lion, and even in the last century had a wide range in Iran and other countries outside India. Today, it has been saved only in the Gir Forest of Sourashtra (Gujarat) and has become extinct everywhere else. This is a feat of conservation of which we can be legitimately proud, but our pride in this must be qualified by the sad fact that it was entirely because of poor conservation that the cheetah (or hunting leopard), best known in our country, became totally extinct in India.

His Majesty

The decline of the tiger in recent years in India has caused worldwide anxiety. The tiger, the most magnificent of the greater cats and so widely known in our country from time immemorial (we have references to it in our

Antlered deer





Gazelle and Chinkara (far left)

oldest extant literature), has declined dangerously here, and become locally extinct in many areas, owing mainly to having been shot down and (to a much lesser extent, in my opinion) to being poisoned or otherwise killed by villagers in jungleside hamlets. There is only one kind of tiger in India—the Royal Bengal Tiger is only a title and not a subspecies. The leopard, too, is now locally extinct in many areas where it was formerly common, and is much reduced in numbers. The snow leopard and the clouded leopard are not creatures of the peninsula—they live in the Himalayas and the sub-Himalayan forests to the north-east, within Indian limits.

Like most tropical countries, we have a few civets, and no less than five different kinds of mongoose—both the civet and the mongoose have been associated with our culture and folklore from the earliest times. The only hyena of the country, the striped hyena, is also found elsewhere in Asia and in Africa too.

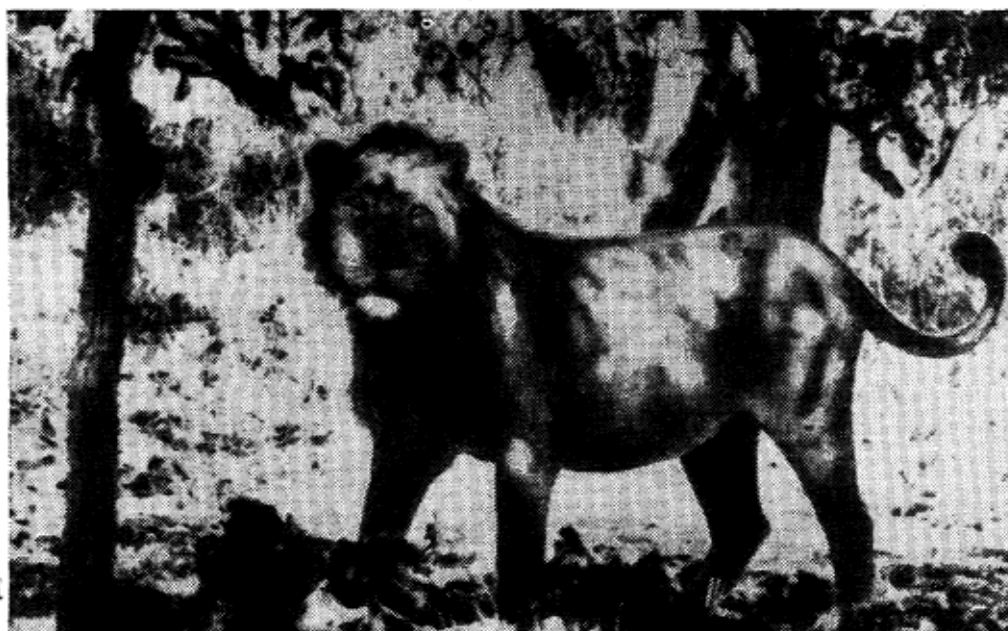
The wolf is now extinct in most of its former haunts in the South, and rare even in the North: in the peninsula,

it is an animal of the plains, forests and foothills. The jackal and 'wild dog' or dhole have a wide distribution within India, as they do outside the country. The dinky little Indian fox (which is our own) is a plains animal, and was common in the flat country along the coast and inland till these tracts were so largely occupied by humanity or converted to human uses.

The bear of the peninsula is the sloth bear. Once such a familiar creature in the countryside, especially in the hill-dotted plains, it is now locally extinct in many places where it was well known only a generation ago. This bear is not only peculiarly Indian (it is found, outside India, only in Ceylon, but the Ceylonese sloth bear is considered a subspecies), it is altogether so peculiar in its build and habits that it has been assigned a taxonomical niche apart from all other bears. This is a typically Indian animal very much in need of urgent and effective conservation.

We have three otters, and the ratel (or honey badger) is one of those creatures that is found not only in our country (and elsewhere in Asia) but also in Africa.

Lion



Of all the mammals, the rodents are the most enterprising and varied, and are to be found everywhere, from the Pole to the tropics. Here, too, we have a great many of them—mice, rats, squirrels, porcupines, and hares. I wish to mention only two disconnected facts about this great variety of our rodents. We do not have the rabbit (except for the rare, or possibly extinct, "Assam rabbit" or hispid hare, which is a rabbit of sorts) but only hares. The taxonomical distinctions between rabbits and hares are tenuous, but we need not bother about them—the fact remains that our hares are not a major menace to agriculture and vegetation, as rabbits are in many countries. The other thing I should say about our rodents is that the Indian giant squirrel (often called the Malabar squirrel) and the large brown flying squirrel, both found in deciduous forests all over the country, are the largest and handsomest of all squirrels, and that even the familiar little striped squirrel has real claims to looks.

The Great One

Our elephant belongs to a quite different genus from the elephants of Africa, and is found in many countries of south-east Asia besides ours—all the same it is called the Indian Elephant, and I think the name justified in view of its attaining as magnificent a stature here as anywhere else, and being so anciently associated with our art, literature, mythology and folklore. Wild elephants are still to be found all over the country, from the sub-Himalayan tracts to southernmost India, but not in some States, such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh and even Andhra Pradesh. With the sustained and increasing penetration of elephant jungles by our ever-increasing humanity, we are coming more often into contact with the great, long-lived beasts, which need extensive forests and are apt to panic and sometimes to turn aggressive in the face of human disturbance; moreover, when disturbed and panicked, they often stray into areas outside their normal beat, and are so seen at times well away from their usual haunts. All this has led to the fallacious rumour that elephants are currently on the increase. In many parts of India, over many years, I have investigated this rumour and am quite satisfied that it is wholly untrue.

Except for certain species of African zebras, animals of the horse family are among the rarest of the world's wild mammals. The Indian wild ass, which inhabits the Rann of Cutch, is an authentic wild equine animal.

The saga of the saving of the Great

Indian Onehorned Rhinoceros in Bengal and Assam is one of the triumphs of conservation in our country in the face of almost overwhelming odds. No wild beast is more persistently poached, for rhinoceros horn is almost worth its weight in gold, because of the superstitious belief in its magic rejuvenating powers (a belief entirely without foundation in fact). Once, there were other rhinoceroses, too, in our country. But now we have only the onehorned rhino, largest of Asiatic rhinos, and in body size one of the two largest in the world. This rhinoceros is dominantly Indian, being found outside our country only in parts of Nepal.

India can boast of the largest, tallest as well as the most handsome of the world's wild oxen. The Indian wild buffalo is the heaviest and most massive bovine in the world, and is entirely our own: almost all strains of domesticated buffaloes are descended from it, and when allowed to run wild regain much of the size and aggressive spirit lost in the course of centuries of domestication. In



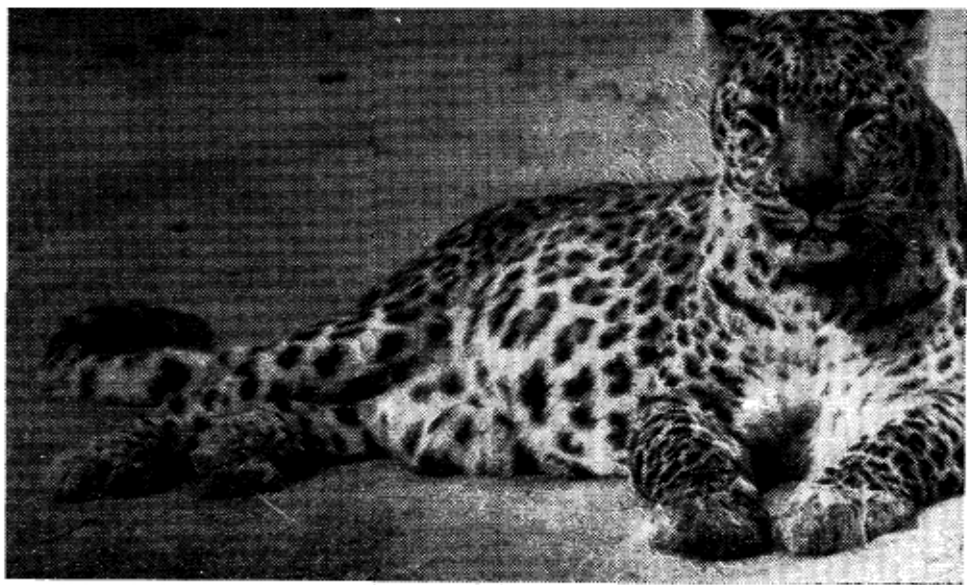
Chitals

ancient times, the domesticated buffalo of our country was exported abroad, and more recently to Australia, where it has run wild. The wild buffalo, which has been preserved mainly in Assam, is rare in the peninsula today. It is, probably, the most fearless and powerful of all wild oxen.

Splendid Species

The gaur, often miscalled 'bison' is the tallest and much the most handsome of all wild cattle, and has a wide distribution in south-east Asia, but nowhere does it attain the size and development of horn it does in South India. It is found in many parts of India, in and around hill forests, and usually favours the same jungles that wild elephants do. Adult bulls turn solitary at times, and 'lone bulls' are

Panther



a feature of the species, but normally gaur are highly gregarious. We have few more impressive spectacles of wild life to offer than a big herd of gaur grazing peacefully through a hill forest.

Wild sheep and goats are essentially creatures of the high Himalayas and adjacent hills. In the peninsula, however, we have the Nilgiri tahr (often miscalled the 'Nilgiri ibex'), a splendid wild goat which is found nowhere excepting the peaks of the Western Ghats and associated hills in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Africa is the land of the antelopes, with such a profusion of so many kinds, from the smallest to the largest and many with impressive horns. We have only four members of the family in peninsular India, the chinkara, the blackbuck, the chowsingha and the nilgai. But then the last three of these four are exclusively Indian, and even otherwise each is unique in its own way. The blackbuck, the type-specimen of all antelopes, is perhaps the most beautiful of the family and is the fastest long-distance runner on earth. Known from time immemorial to our culture, till about 50 years ago it was still plentiful all over the plains of India, in swift, vast herds. With the ruthless conquest of the plains country by our increasing humanity, and with sustained and unchecked shooting and snaring, the blackbuck is now locally extinct in many of the areas where it was long known, and has dwindled lamentably everywhere.

The unique Chowsingha, the only wild animal with four horns (only the buck is horned, and in front of the regular horns, which are mere spikes,

there is a pair of even smaller spikes, or often only a pair of horny knobs) has a discontinuous and somewhat capricious distribution in the forested plateaus of the peninsula: unlike most antelopes, it is not gregarious. The nilgai, largest of our antelopes (it is the size of a pony, and bigger than even the largest of our deer) is a remarkably ungainly and peculiar animal: in the bull, which is blue-roan in colour, the horns are mere spikes, out of proportion to the big build of the animal. The nilgai is mainly found in the country north of the Godavari.

Dear Deer

No country can boast of anywhere near as many deer as ours can: we have no less than nine distinct species of deer, the hangul or Kashmir stag, the thamin, the swamp deer or barasingha (in two sub-species), the sambar, the hog deer, the chital, the musk deer (which is a Himalayan animal), the barking deer or muntjac, and the chevrotain or mouse deer. Of these the splendid hangul (which is the red deer of Europe in a subspecies confined to Kashmir), the magnificently antlered barasingha (both subspecies) and the chital (also found in Ceylon) considered by many the prettiest of all deer, are all wholly Indian. The sambar attains its finest development of body and antler only in our country, though it has a wide distribution outside it.

The wild boar, so well known to our mythology and *puranas*, has a very wide distribution in the country. It attains a truly formidable size in certain areas, but is fairly common everywhere in the peninsula, in forest and jungle.

(more pictures overleaf)

Elephants

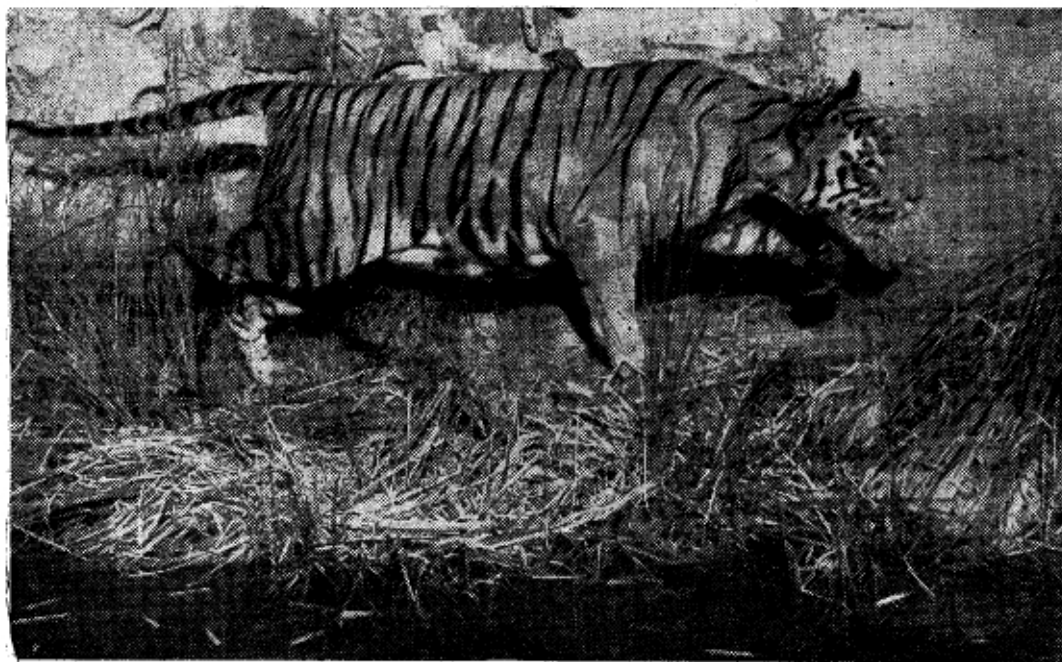




Wild buffaloes



Swamp deer



*Royal Bengal
Tiger*

Langur



WILD LIFE VIGNETTES



Black buck



M. KRISHNAN

Rhinoceros

Spotted deer

