

# Through My Lens

## Wildlife and Tribal Culture



Mahendra Rathod



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# Through my Lens

## Wildlife and Tribal Culture

by

Mahendra Rathod

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# About the author



From my early days I have been passionate by nature. I always loved being out in nature, I love to look at the birds, listen to their singing, go hiking and sometimes being alone with the great outdoors. Other things I like to do are staying healthy, painting, running, reading and writing.

After completing my study in 1990 I joined the Indian Customs as an officer. Initially, I was posted in anti-smuggling unit at Porbandar, Gujarat. And so, as a part of my duty, I had chance to explore the long sea-coast of the Saurashtra region of Gujarat, which was abundant of various forests and rural villages. I even sailed in the sea-water of that region for patrolling. This exposure allowed me to immerse myself into nature and closely observe the fine art of nature. It also provided me opportunity to see and experience culture and traditions of rural areas of Saurashtra. Then I started visiting many forests, grasslands, wetlands and culture rich rural areas.

In the beginning I was carrying a small point-and-shoot camera and did some photography like everyone. I was trying to understand the nature and wildlife, and the inter-relatedness of everything. But I became more serious about photography when I bought my first DSLR camera in 2013. The more I learned and practiced, the more I fell in love with it, and the better I became. Gradually my fascination turned into passion for photography. My art background, my love for nature and my wanderlust enabled me to become a passionate wildlife photographer.

I realised that when I am out with camera, I am able to find a sense of solitude and peace that I find difficult to obtain with the hum of electricity and traffic noise. I find that it is the best way to beat all anxieties and stresses. Last but not least it's taught me to breath, take it all in, it's such a wonderful world out there, too much to do and see.



# Foreword

I am delighted to introduce Shri Mahendra Rathod, a tax official in his calling, as a hobby photographer and a wildlife enthusiast. He has travelled widely across the Indian subcontinent and captured some poignant moments in the life and times of animals and birds out there in their natural habitat.

Mahendra has not only used his camera lens effectively to ‘capture’ nature in its pristine beauty but also the people who lived around there known as Tribes.

This book is the beginning of his journey to be recognised as a serious player in the world of flora and fauna and the environment. I expect Mahendra to reach even greater heights ‘Through My Lens’.

This book is filled with magnificent photos taken by Mahendra. The following are a few of my favourites.



*A lioness with cubs in the jungles of Gir*





*A majestic tigress at Ranthambore*



*Blackbuck on the run at Velavadar National Park*

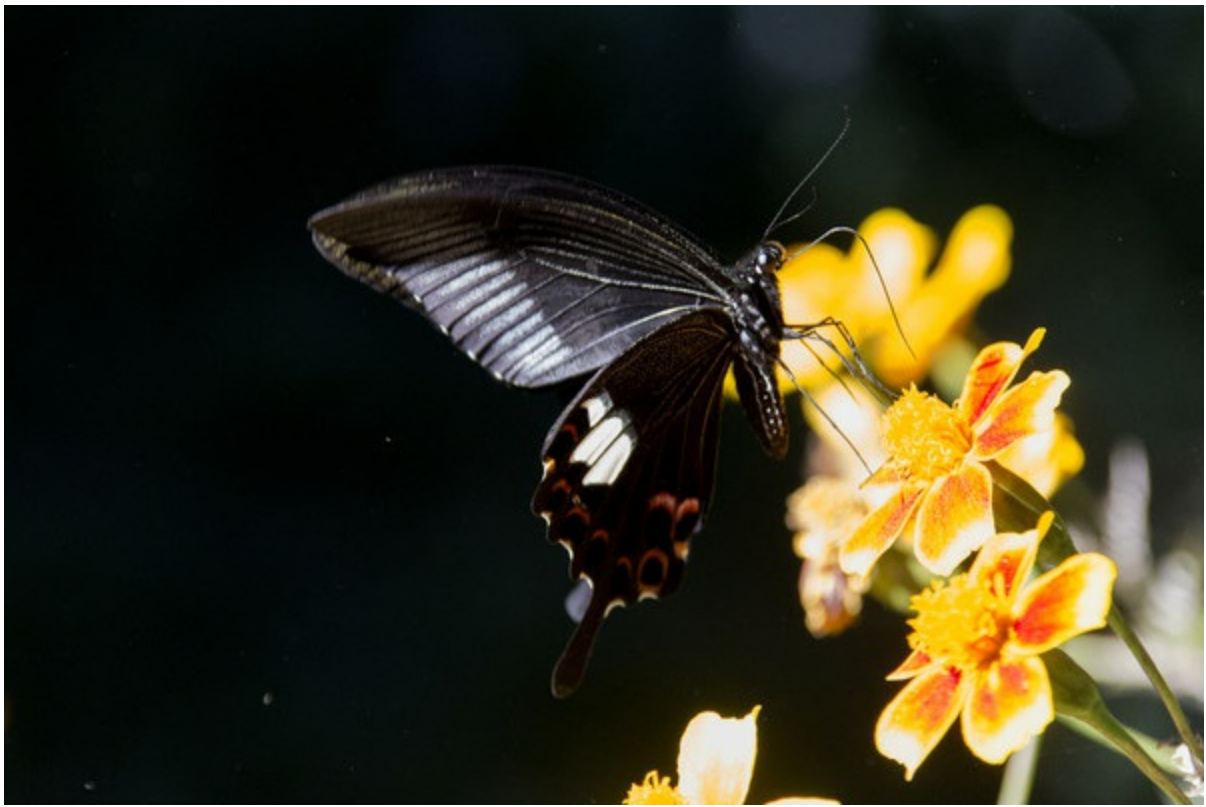


*Nilgai fighting for dominance*



*Indian Pitta*





*Lesser Helen butterfly*



*Signature Spider*



*Magical mask dance of Bhutan*



*Girls of Meghwal tribe of Kutch*





*Fishermen at sunset.*

I would heartily encourage you to write to Mahendra at [mahenprathod2@gmail.com](mailto:mahenprathod2@gmail.com) and let him know which ones appeal to you!

— *Subhash Mathur*

# From the Publisher

[InOurDays.org](http://InOurDays.org) is proud to dedicate its ebook section to Shrimati Ramani Devi. Married to Shri Brij Mohan Lal Bhatnagar and the proud mother of two adorable children, Subhash and Tilak, she became my mother-in-law when I got married to Tilak in 1974.



Ramani Devi was a simple housewife but, in her own small ways, influenced some of the big decisions within the family. She was stickler for maintaining time schedules and always wore a wrist watch to ensure punctuality. Her cooking left the guests asking for another chance to savour the delicacies.

She lived simply, ate frugally but remained fully active and alert till she passed away at the ripe old age of 93. The entire clan remembers her for her wit, charm and loads of affection.

At InOurDays eBooks publishing, we are privileged to have Shri Mahendra Rathod as our first ebook author.

We hope you have enjoyed reading this ebook as much as we have enjoyed publishing it!

We hope this pioneering effort will motivate other budding story tellers to come forward with their ebooks.

If you have a manuscript, we promise to publish it. Please send it to email address [editor.inourdays@gmail.com](mailto:editor.inourdays@gmail.com) or [subhmat@yahoo.com](mailto:subhmat@yahoo.com).

— *Subhash Mathur*

Editor: [InOurDays.org](http://InOurDays.org)

Publisher of *InOurDays eBooks*

And a short story teller

# Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family for their endless support and encouragement. Their love has been the major spiritual support in my life.



*My family*

I consider myself the luckiest man in the world to have such a lovely and caring family, standing beside me with their love and unconditional support.

— *Mahendra Rathod*

# Acknowledgements

I wish to thank and express my profound gratitude, indebtedness and appreciation to my esteemed mentor, my guide Shri P. Bhargav, Director of Institute for Photography Excellence, Editor of 'Fotogenious' Magazine and unquestionably a great Photographer, for guiding me patiently and for giving me indispensable tips for bettering my photography skill. I am also grateful to him for helping me in editing and preparing of this book. Thank you so much, sir.

I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to Shri Subhash Mathur, the former Chief Commissioner, Customs & Central Excise, Ministry of Finance, Government of India, for encouraging me to write this book. I am thankful to him for recognising the spark in me and giving me the opportunity. I am humbled by your generosity, sir.

— *Mahendra Rathod*

# Preface

“Thirty thousand years ago, when men were doing cave paintings, they worked twenty hours a week to provide themselves with food and shelter and clothing. The rest of the time, they could play, or sleep, or do whatever they wanted. And they lived in a natural world, with clean air, clean water, beautiful trees and sunsets.” — *Michael Crichton*

As long as humans have existed, we have lived in Nature. Our homes were surrounded by unspeakable beauty of nature and wilderness. We lived in harmony with other creatures. We lived with our own traditions, our own culture. Lives were natural and peaceful. It's only very recently that we have become “civilised”, urban creatures. Now we are highly engaged with technology, modern amenities, social media, modern world is continuing to speed up and people everywhere are losing touch with being connected to the land and familiar customs. We are going far — from nature, our heritage, our roots, our home.

Most of us seldom take time to stop, listen to the background sounds and appreciate the moon, the stars and all nature that surround us. Perhaps part of the anxiety we all experience in life due to this unnatural separation from nature and culture. I believe photography is powerful media to reconnect the people with nature and culture, as connecting is protecting.

In this e-book I have shared my travel experiences and beautiful moments, captured by me in my camera, which I had with nature, wildlife and people from diverse cultures. It would be worth to mention here that I am not a professional photographer, but basically I am nature lover by heart and enthusiastic and creative person with deep passion for photography. I found this is true passion of mine and I love sharing it.

I like to take photos because I like to admire the beauty we are surrounded by and share with others, hoping that they will take a moment or two in busy lives to stop and look and realise the true value of vanishing nature and culture.

My book is an edited compilation of my articles and photographs published in various magazines over the past few years. I decided to put these together in a book in order to share with friends and people of like mind.

Join me in the journey. Let's walk with the wild and capture the eternal moments!

— *Mahendra Rathod*

# 1. Birds through my lens



As a child I was mesmerised by birds. I loved to spend time on a summer evening looking at the sky, seeing swallows, swifts, and nighthawks swooping and gliding through the air.





*Red Rumped Swallows*

I loved watching the group of little sparrows taking dust bath with constant chirping, hopping and peeping was a great fun for me. The beauty of birds ever enthral me and provides me a sheer joy.



*Asian Open Bill*

My whole conception of what is beautiful has changed when I begin to pay attention to birds and begin to love them. On closer approach, I realised that birds are amazing creatures.





*Bar-headed Geese*

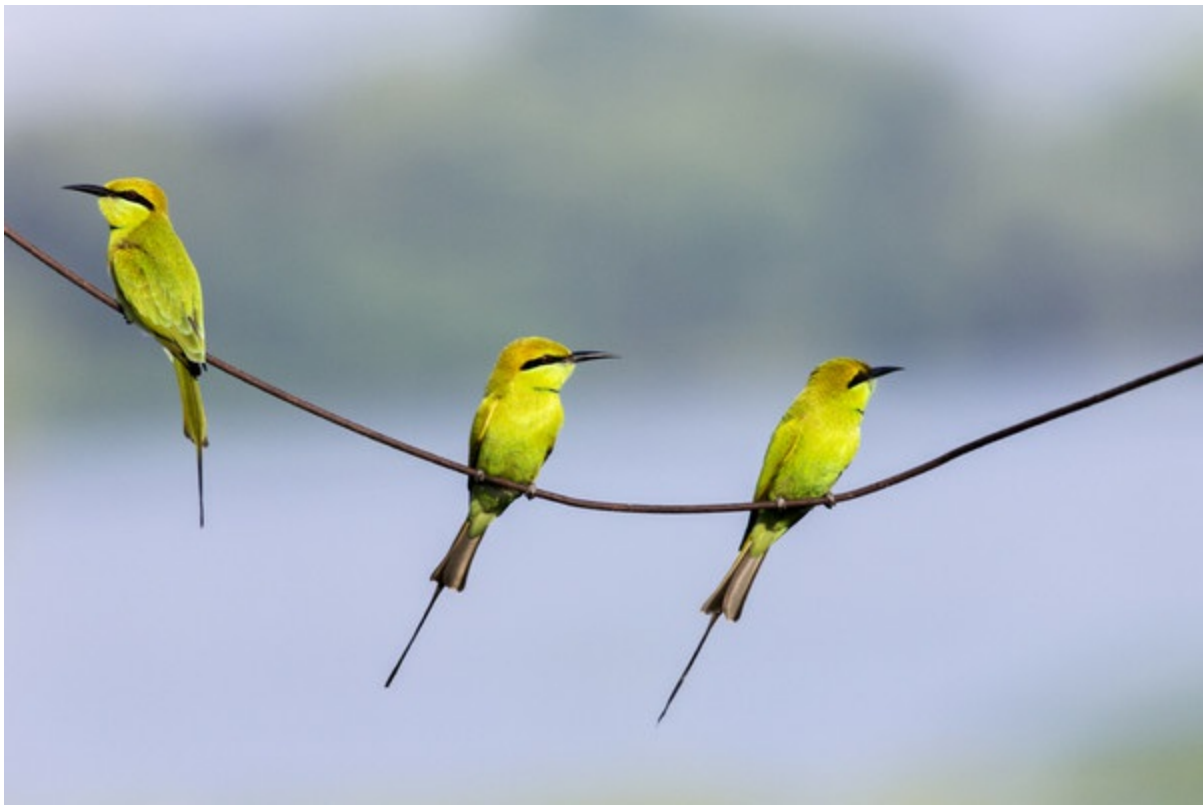
I found that from hummingbirds to raptors, they are magnificent. I felt that they are beautiful in sight and also in behaviour. I am always fascinated with birds and never get tired of watching them.



*Darter*

The joy of watching birds in their natural habitat and observing their behaviour arouse a lot of interest in nature. I think no other creature can transcend earth, evoke beauty, inspire dreams, and ground us in

nature as does even the smallest bird. Like many bird lovers and birds watchers, I became hooked and my fascination finally converted into a passion for Bird Photography.



*Green Bee-Eaters*

Bird photography provides me the much needed entertainment by taking away from the hectic pace of modern life, sharpens my sensibilities, develops my powers of observation, makes me a nature lover and emphatically converts me into a fervent conservationist. I had little idea of how to get good pictures, other than realising I needed to get close.



*Indian Roler*

There is a large variety of birds to explore and shoot. Every shoot is different, and I always feel as excited as if it was my first shoot. I respond to landscapes that have birds in them. My hunting grounds are the fields and lakes near my hometown (Ahmedabad), where I try to improve my skill, study the local as well migrant birds.



*Indian Pitta*



My favourite spots for bird photography are Nalsarovar, Thol Lake and Little Rann of Kutch which are nearer to my city.



*Grey Leg Geese in flight*

Nalsarovar is declared as a 'Ramsar site', which harbour wide variety of local resident birds and also attracts millions of winter migrant birds.



*Little Grebe*

Thol Lake is a man-made irrigation lake surrounded by forest and agricultural land, which encompasses many species of native as well as migratory birds. Since it is the place nearest to my home, about 23 kms, I frequently visit this wetland, generally on weekends. One can watch here plenty of flamingoes playing and eating in the shallow water, Pelicans catching fish in groups, Demoiselle Cranes flying in flocks here and there and many more bird activity.



*Greater Flamingos*



*Greater Flamingos*



*Lesser Flamingos*





*Great White Pelicans*



*Painted Stork*

I try to understand their behaviour and to learn how to approach birds without causing alarm. The more I observe them from close proximity, the more inspiring it is.

Little Rann of Kutch, is an extended part of Kutch Desert, and it is a popular site for photographing raptor birds like Short-toed Eagle, Acquila Eagles, six species of falcon, Buzzards, Harrier etc.





*Pallid Scops Owl*

Apart from regular visits of these places, I visit many forests, wetlands, grassland located in various parts of Gujarat and India as and when found opportunity. Spending time amidst these myriad of winged beauties provides sheer joy to my soul.



*River Tern and White Winged Tern*

Bird photography is a constant challenge, full of surprises, very unpredictable, time consuming, but the results can be highly rewarding when you capture a moment for posterity. Photographing birds is a demanding speciality; It requires lots of patience, time, technical skill, knowledge about birds and their behaviour. My main challenge is to find the right balance between work, family duties, and photography so as to continue enjoying this rather time-consuming hobby.



*Pond Heron*

My creative and emotional attachment to birds enables me to get close enough to capture their beauty and behaviour in their natural environment. Capturing those moments and sharing with friends and family helped me to spread that joy of nature. I understand, without photography there can be no visual message. Bird photographers can provide a voice for the ones who can't speak for themselves, before it is too late. They can initiate change. That is the power of photography.



*Spot Bill Duck*

Birds inspired me to reach for greater height in life. They are the planet's superheroes, built for survival. They spread their wings and bridge the gap between our world and the natural world. Birds have many superpowers than humans can only envy. But we have extraordinary powers to alter the chemistry of the air and the sea, and to create synthetic substances that live longer than we do. It saddens me that some of us honestly think there is no harm in losing a few species of birds to extinction here or there.



*Common Kingfisher*

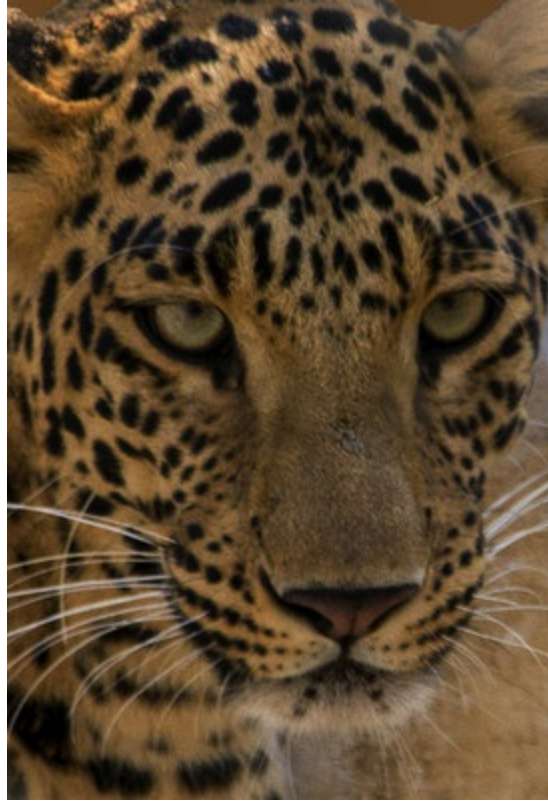
Everything on this big blue-green ball we live on is linked in some way and thinking we can just write off a few birds should not be an option. Earth is home to all creatures including birds, and this fact should be accepted by all the humans. As we have the full right to live, wander and do whatever we like on this planet then they too have the same. It is an agreeable fact that a picture is worth a thousand words, hence I try to pass on my message through my images.





*Indian Pitta*

## 2. Zooming into the wilderness



*Majestic Leopard*

My passion for Nature and Wildlife Photography took many years to take shape. Being in lap of mother nature and wild surroundings makes me feel very fortunate and I think it is a best option to come out from the busy life amidst the concrete jungle.



*A rare white black buck*

I love wild creatures, I love being out in nature, I love travelling and I love photography. Spending time with nature and wild creatures gives me immense pleasure.



*Desert Fox in its den*

Whenever I get free from my work I visit nearby grasslands, wetlands, forests or sanctuaries. Being out in nature and wilderness for photography provides me an experience of being enveloped in a



peace and serenity.



*Desert Fox*

Beautiful and interesting environment brings a feeling of perfect relaxation, of being perfectly in balance. I think the camera is a tool that not only takes you out to the world but also helps you journey deep within yourself.



*Garden Lizard focusing on prey*

This fascinating hobby of Wildlife Photography helps me to understand the diversity and creativity of nature and also to understand the requirement of restoration of ecology and conservation of wildlife. I believe that photography is not only a great way to express yourself, but it is a greater conservation tool also.



*Green Chameleon*

Wildlife photography is not an easy feat. Not only does it require you to spend a lot of time outdoors, but also demands that you be patient for the perfect shot. It is regarded as one of the more challenging forms of photography and the wildlife photographer needs technical skill.





*Indian rhinoceros*

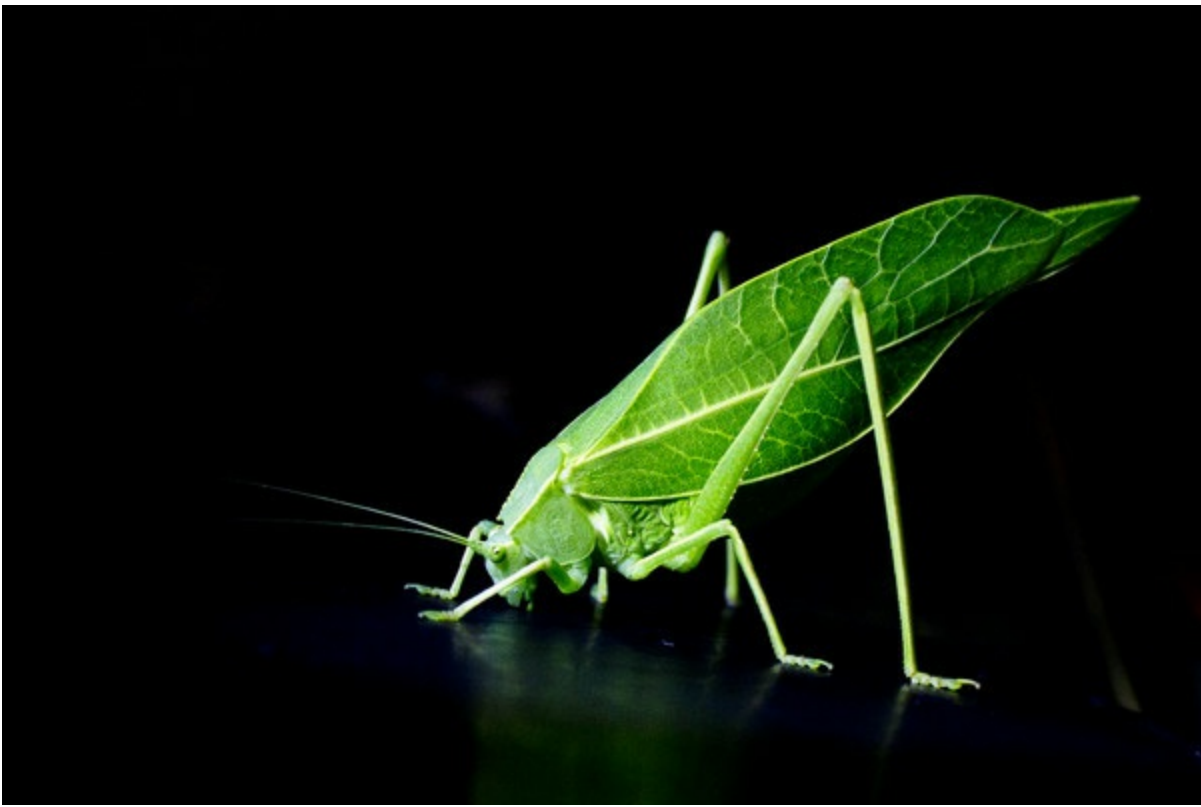
For example, some animals are difficult to approach and thus knowledge of animal's behaviour is needed. Through observation of animal behaviour one can know what they are capable of.



*Wild Hog*

There is much more to explore in wildlife, nature and her offspring promise plenty of breath-taking moments that are captured and shared to others by the wildlife photographers.





*Katadid*

Photographing wildlife is a demanding speciality, but the results can be highly rewarding when you capture a moment for posterity.



*Leopard—the stealthy predator*

I try to capture ‘decisive moments‘ in nature and to show wildlife contextually in its environment hoping that my pictures will inspire people in same way to care about and conserve the natural world.



*Lesser Flamingo*

I want to use the medium of photography as method to capture the beautiful things I witness in nature, placing a frame around something I have seen, letting the image convey the true beauty of that moment in time, that my word could never describe.



*A group of wild asses in Little Rann of Kutch*

Without photography there can be no visual message. Wildlife photographers can provide a voice for the ones who can't speak for themselves, before it is too late. They can initiate change. That is the power of photography.



*Male Garden Lizard impressing the female*

My creative and emotional attachment to nature enables me to get close enough to capture the beauty and behaviour of the animals in their natural environment. I am fascinated with birds and animals and never get tired of watching and photographing them. I love capturing animals and birds in action, such as fighting, playing, hunting, flying etc.





*Nilgai—fighting for dominance*

I tried my hand to capture essence of nature and wildlife from various places in the country such as Rann of Kutch, Sasan-Gir, Ranthambhore, Velavadar, Kashmir, Andamans, North-East States and many more places, which are enthrall providing innumerable opportunities to make gorgeous images.



*Rose Ringed Parakeet*

It is my intention to use my images reflecting the natural world to bring awareness in the people about beautiful wildlife we have on our doorstep and all around us and importance of conservation and the need to preserve our national heritage.



*Signature Spider*

Through my images I want to convey the message to the people that our planet is an amazing place which we jointly share and we need to preserve its wonders for the future generation.



*Wild Asses in the dusk of desert*



### 3. Capturing Culture



*A girl from the Meghwal tribe in front of a traditional Kutchhi home*

India has legacy of cultural variety and deep-rooted artistic expression. Replete with unique, diverse and vivid cultures, India offers an insight into the preserved heritage. All the regions and religions of India have their own culture with many customs, traditions, language and living style. The land of this country got through multiple influences, which have created intermix of civilisations and times.





*A traditional home at Jaisalmer*

The rich culture of India has many things in its plethora to attract any avid photographer. It has colours, vibrancy, costumes, dances, diversity, and many more things to capture in camera, which draw attention of the ardent photographers from the county and world.



*Kathputali is a traditional art form of Rajasthan*

From the period of Mauryas, Cholas and Mughals to the period of British Empire, India has always been famous because of its colourful and unique culture. The warmth in the relations and euphoria in celebrations make the country stand out distinctly in the clutter. Incredibly rich culture of the country attracts the people from all over the world. It is a land of mysterious paradoxes, where the food, festivals and folk dances everything is unique and distinct.



*The Dungri Garasiya tribe of Sabarkantha*





*The Fakirana Jat tribe of Kutch*



*A beautiful tribal girl of Kutch*





*A Kutchhi tribal girl*



*A nomadic tribal girl from Kutch*



*A woman from the Bishnoi tribe of Rajasthan*

India is home to numerous religious, cultural and spiritual fairs and festivals, which are unique symbol of national integrity and pride for the people of India.



*Playing Holi - Vanjara Tribe*

Also the India is having a treasure of variety of folk dances, which reflects the cultural diversity and rich traditional pattern in the Indian society. To capture any form of dance, whether it may be classical



dances like Kathakali, Kathak, Bharatnatyam etc or folk dances like Ghoomar from Rajasthan, Bihu from Assam, Lavni from Maharashtra etc. is any photographer's delight. It is just like capturing the visual poetry into camera.



*Kathak Dance at Modhera Sun Temple*



*Kathakali of Kerala*





*Gotipua Dance of Odisha*

In the beautiful land of this country, people of different ethnicity and religion lives together, with a very distinct and vibrant way of living. In fact, it is amalgamation several cultures, where languages, religions, dance, music, clothing, customs etc. differ from place to place within the country. Most impressive and charming is the colorful costume, which provides unique identity to the people of different caste, community and region. Especially in the Tribal and Rural areas of the country, the people have still maintained the traditional value and opted to live in their traditional look with their colorful and striking attire, adorned with heavy ornaments.



*Kutchhi Rabari women in Little Rann of Kutch*



*Kutchhi women under veil*



*Rabari women at Rajasthan-Gujarat Border*

Indian tribal people play a key part in constructing the cultural heritage of India. The traditional and cultural distinction of each tribal community has made them distinguishable from each other and their cultural and traditional heritage add colour and variation to the Indian culture as a whole and form a compact culture. I love to capture images of tribal. Their simplicity, way of living with nature, warm hospitality, uniqueness of culture and traditional attire attracts me ever.





*Old woman of Jat tribe in traditional attire*



*Garasiya Tribe of Sabarkantha, Gujarat*

Indian culture has been changing over the past few years due to the threat of western culture. Westernisation is effecting one of the oldest and richest cultures and taking away the traditions. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was much concerned about preserving the great values of India's cultural heritage

and transmitting them to future generations. This rich cultural heritage gives us, in Jawaharlal Nehru's words, an image of the "buoyant energy and love of life".



*Beautiful Kashmiri girls in traditional attire*

In my view, to strengthen the cultural vitality and preserve traditional values and to make the vanishing cultural values indelible, one of the best ways is by capturing and immortalising the evocative moments that demand attention. Photographs representing the cultural value of the India give a broader view of the people and cultural heritage of this country and immortalise it in a frame.





*Girls of Meghwal tribe of Kutch*



## 4. Butterfly Diary

“Beautiful and graceful, varied and enchanting, small but approachable, butterflies lead you to the sunny side of life. And everyone deserves a little sunshine.” — *Jeffery Glassberg*



*Blue Pansy*

Butterflies are among the most known and loved favourite insect, and of course excellent subject for photography. The fact that they do not sting or bite, are brightly coloured, and do not become pests in people's homes has something to do with why most people enjoy seeing them fly around and would seldom think of killing one (as one might do with other insects thought of only as "bugs").

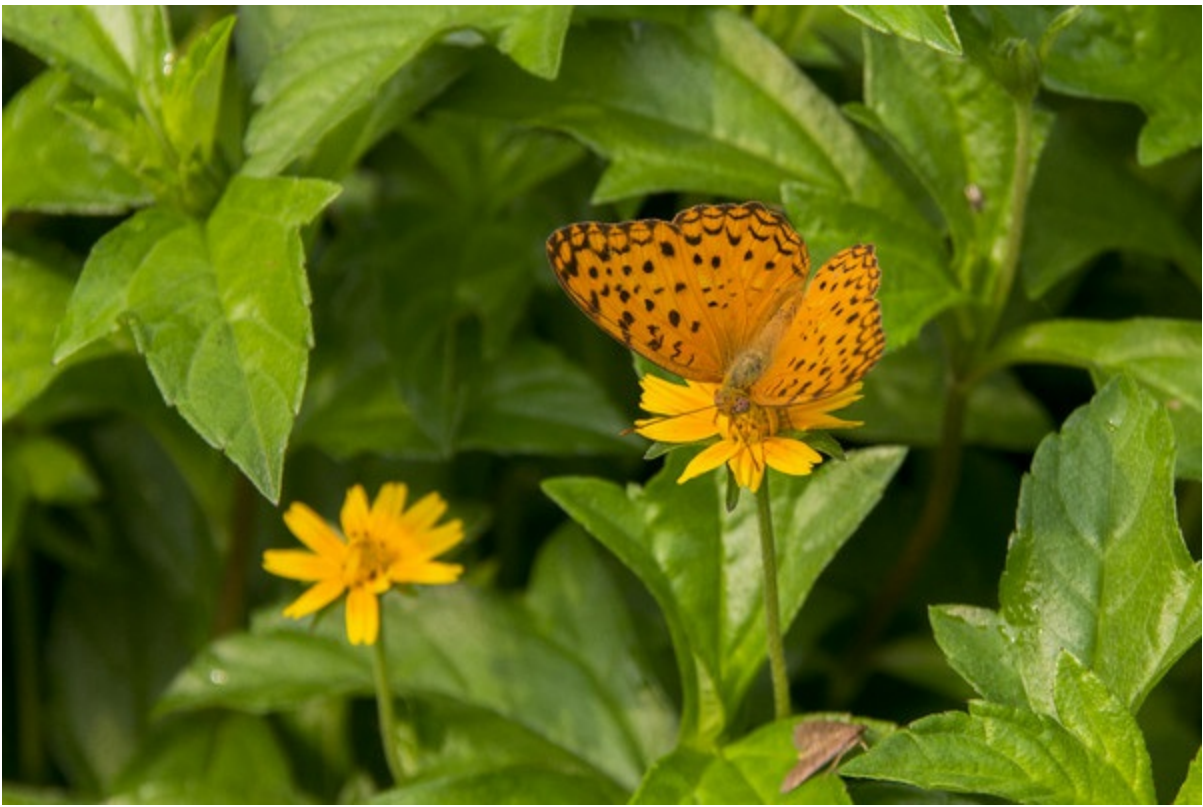


*Blue Tiger*



*Blue Tiger*

Chasing and photographing butterflies is enjoyable pursuit for me that have led me to know and understand about this beautiful creature more deeply.



*Common leopard*



*Danaid Eggfly*

Of all the popular photographic subjects in nature, few can rival butterflies in terms of colour, variety, and charisma; however photography of butterflies present the photographer with more technical challenges.





*Indian Pioneer*



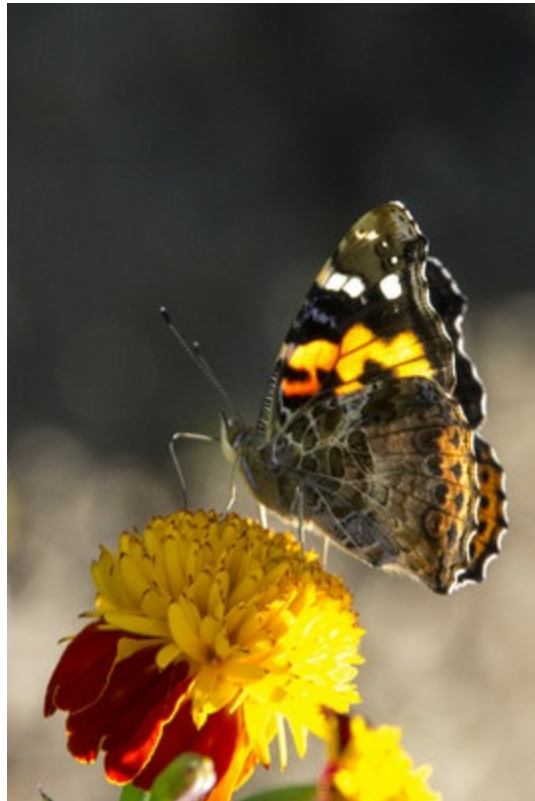
*Lemon Pansy*

From their spectacularly colourful wings that can be maddeningly difficult to get into proper focus to their flighty feeding habits that cause them to move to another flower a split second before the shutter release button is depressed, butterfly photography can test photographic skills in ways few other nature subjects can.



*Lesser Helen*

Patience is the keyword for butterfly photography. If one is to embark upon any serious attempt, be it amateur or professional, artistic or scientific, at capturing images of butterflies,



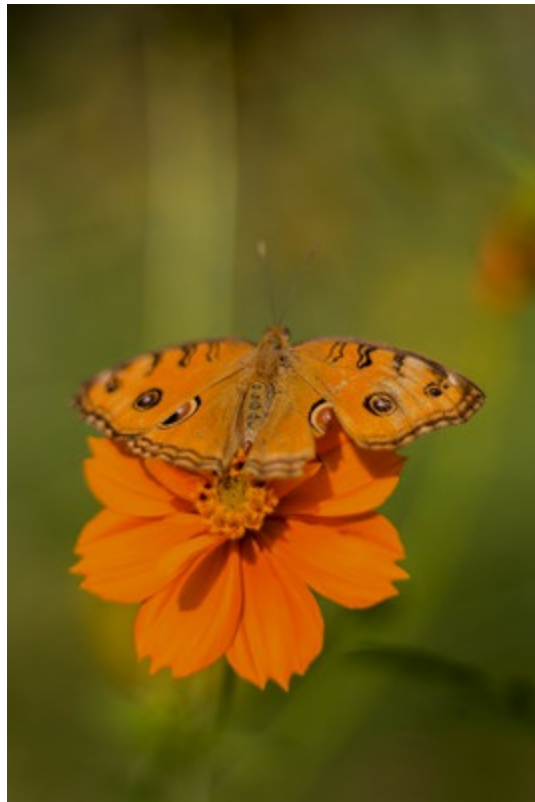
*Painted Lady*

I prefer to photograph butterflies during the right season on a windless day early in the morning or late in the evening when light is soft and/or warm. I use to go to local park or any outdoor spot that

has a lot of flowers and leaves which make great landing spots for butterflies.



*Peacock Pansy*



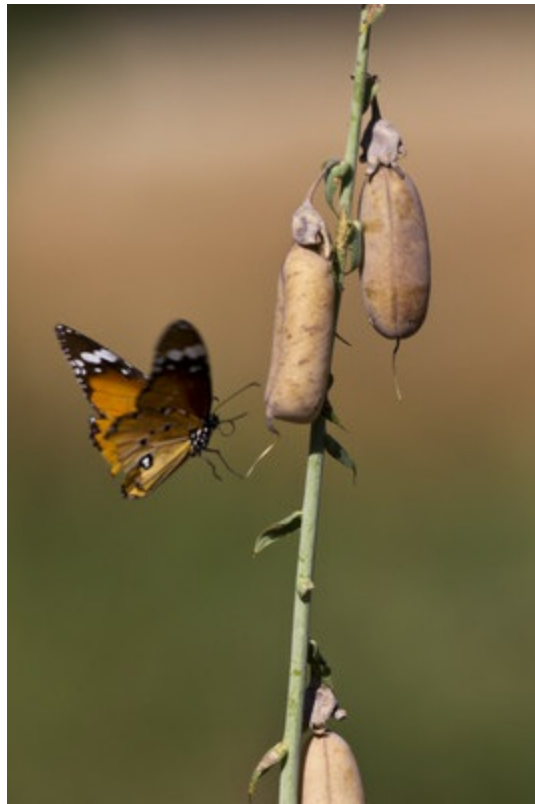
*Peacock Pansy*

Sometimes I don't even take photos, rather I just enjoy the movement of this exceptionally beautiful insect wings covered in unique patterns and brilliant colors.





*Plain Tiger*



*Plain Tiger*



*Plain Tiger*



*Plain Tiger*

For photographing the Butterflies Macro Lens is an ideal option, but I do it with my 50 mm lens. Even sometimes I use my telephoto lens of 150-600 mm which I use for bird photography and multipurpose lens of 18-200 mm.



*Tree Yellow*

The butterflies simply make the world a prettier place. Butterfly's grace not inspires only the shutterbug to capture its vibrant colours, but it also inspires all of us in more than one way. The Nature is a never ending source of inspiration and I hope that we can preserve it.



*Blue Tigers and Striped Tiger*



# 5. Landscapes



*Be still like a mountain and flow like a great river.*



*How glorious a greeting the sun gives the mountains!*



*If you truly love nature, you will find beauty everywhere.*



*In nature, light creates the color. In the picture, colour creates the light.*



*Nature is painting for us, day after day, a picture of infinite beauty.*



## 6. In the land of lions



*A majestic male lion*

In this fast world of ours, timetable and appointments dictate the walk of life. These days the thin line between work and life has emaciated to the extent that it has almost blurred.

To come out from this stagnancy jungle trekking is the best option to take a break from the routine busy life amidst the concrete jungles to the simple pleasures of the Mother Nature and wild surroundings.

To shatter the knots of monotony, I set out with my family and friends to visit the jungle of Gir (also known as Sasan-Gir), the only refuge of the impressive and majestic Asiatic Lions.

Gir forest is the only place in the world, outside Africa, where the lions can be seen in its natural habitat. From Biblical times till a hundred years ago, the Asiatic lion roamed over a vast area ranging from Greece through West Asia to Bengal and Bihar.

The last Asiatic Lion seen outside Gir was in 1884, and the king of the jungle has taken his final refuge at Gir.

We were told that serious and timely protection measures have raised their numbers to just over 400. With the beginning of 20th Century, Nawab of Junagadh in Gujarat realised that about 15 lions were alive. Other animals were also struggling for survival due to widespread famine in region. The Nawab took immediate supportive steps to ensure their survival and provided adequate protection to the lions. Their population increased between the years 1904 and 1911.



*Impressive lioness*

It will be pertinent to note that Indians were the first in world to realise the importance of conservation of nature and animals. In 300 BC Kautilya, the mentor and the powerful minister of Chandragupta Maurya, wrote 'Arthshastra' and recounted a comprehensive method of conservation and forestry system by the name of 'Abhay Aranya' means forest free from rear. It may be the first ever documented system of living in peace and harmony with wild animals.

After arriving at Sasan Gir, we got accommodation at the 'Sinh Sadan Guest House' a beautiful lodge run by the Forest Department having all the modern amenities. After spending a relaxing night, we were all set for a hectic day full of adventure and thrill. However, I was sceptical that I would see a lion because of my previous three unsuccessful trips to the Gir. But I packed my camera anyway hoping that the much celebrated king of beasts would not disappoint me this time. A real encounter with the wild beast, 'The Royal Jungle King' was my cherished dream.

We opted for a jeep safari as they are the best ways to explore the wide home of gigantic lions. Only designated jeeps and drivers are allowed to enter forest with one guide from the forest department. We were lucky to have experienced and expert acquainted guide Shri Tazubhai with us.

No sooner we entered the forest we were welcomed by peacocks and chital deers. We also spotted Sambars—huge and spotless brown deer—, Langurs, wild boar, Nilgais and many birds in numbers. The forest was dry deciduous type and brown, matching with the colour of the Lion's skin. This barren canvas made it far easier to spot the animals. There was silence everywhere and it was hauntingly wild.





*Mottled Wood Owl*

Our eyes were keenly searching for any movement or sounds that would indicate the presence of this mighty beast. But no sighting yet. All of sudden our driver stopped the jeep. We find to the right side of our jeep few meters away, a group of Golden Jackals playing and drinking water at a water pond made by the authority. We were enjoying watching so many Golden Jackals together, but the experienced eyes of our well trained guide Shri Tazubhai noticed something else.





*Family of jackals*

He shouted that two cubs of the jackals are sinking in the water. Tazubhai and the driver rushed towards the pond. The other jackals promptly ran away and hid behind the tree. We noticed the two cubs were tired of making continuous, fruitless attempts to come out from the pond to save their soul. Quickly and carefully, Tazubhai brought them out.



*Jackal cub rescued*



However, we were concerned, as neither of them was not making a movement, though they were breathing slowly. Tazubhai told us they might have gulped some water. He gently lifted them up, hung them upside down for a few seconds, and laid them down again. We were happy and surprised when after few moments both the cubs stood up and ran away towards their family. With great satisfaction, we returned to our jeep and proceeded in search of lions.

In all silence, suddenly we were annoyingly startled by Tazubhai's cellphone ringing out loudly. Another jeep nearby had spotted some lions and called us over their location. It didn't take long to sight this majestic mammal. It was a wonderful scene magnetising our eyes: a lioness sat quietly in the shade with two cubs, staring right at us. Amazingly the colour of lioness was merging with the background. Two magnificent males were also present with them.



*Lioness*

Our driver headed the jeep as close as possible, about 15 feet, to get a closer look and better angle at the lions. We were delighted at this first, lucky sighting.



*Lioness with cubs*

I happily clicked some images of the Royal family of the King of Jungle in my camera. Soon it was time to head back to our lodge, as the time allowed for our morning session was almost over.



*Princes of Sasan*

The evening session was an anticlimax. Our guide, Tazubhai, chose to take us to a small river situated amidst the jungle, with a logic that at the evening time approx at 06.00 PM the lions come there to



drink water, before proceeding for hunting. At one spot we heard an alarm call. Sambar Deers and Langurs were crying in a certain tone. As told by Tazubhai, they do so on spotting a predator, especially a leopard. In a tensed atmosphere we fruitlessly tried to spot the leopard which was around us.

Tazubhai told us leopard sighting is rare, which requires more time and patience. But considering the time factor we preferred to stick to our mission to reach at the river timely. We reached the spot at the fixed time and what we had seen was a fabulous treat to our eyes. Three lioness with the most adorable cubs were there at the river bank in the different mood. Two lioness were drinking water from the river and the other one was sitting little far away from them.



*Lioness with cubs*

The royal cubs were rolling and jumping about the and generally enjoying the carefree days of their lives before they start learning about going out hunting their own food. It was indeed fascinating to catch images of the majestic mammals in their various subtlety of mood.



*Mother lioness with cub*

Yet the excitement was not over. After thanking Tazubhai, we proceeded further. A little ahead, we came across another two young lions sitting on the hill. Their bloody face and breathing pattern were showing that they have just hunted an animal and finished their dinner. They were carelessly staring at us. I just managed to shoot some images of them and we drew back for our dinner.



*A young lion*



We had our dinner at Rambhai's farm, which is a mango orchard spread over 30 Beegha (about 19 acres) on the bank of a small river, just adjacent to the forest. We were fascinated to look many trees of world famous Kesar Mango of the Sasan-Gir around us. It is told that the great Mughal Emperor Akbar was very fond of Kesar Mangoes and he ordered an army of gardeners to raise 1,00,000 mango trees. We felt immense pleasure on exploring the farm.

Rambhai, the farm owner, with all hospitality by heart, served unlimited Aam Ras (mango juice) and Kathiawadi (local) food; it was a great delight after the trip. Rambhai told us lions are visiting his farm frequently to drink water from the river at the end of their farm and it is time when they visit. It was getting dark and we decided to return to our lodge.

Next day we visited the Devadiya park, a fenced jungle, developed as interpretation zone by the authority, where one can have sure shot of the lions. There we had seen five lions resting under the big tree.



*Magnificent male lions*

During our trips we had also seen plenty of birds. Gir is extremely rich in wildlife and is a birdwatcher's paradise.





*Changeable Hawk*

I had photo opportunity to capture the images of various birds such as Spotted Owlet, Mottled Wood Owlet, Changeable Hawk, and a Night Jar.



*Night Jar*

A noted ornithologist, Dr. Salim Ali, said that if there were no lions here, Gir would be well-known as one of the best bird sanctuaries of the country.



*Spotted Owlet*

Indeed, it was a gratifying trip for us. The jungle filled our mind and soul with its wild charms, rawness and freshness.



*Spotted Owlet*

Bachchan, the great actor, after his visit to Gir, wrote on his blog, “What a magnificent country we own. And it is only when you visit these places yourself do you realise it!”





*The king of beasts*



## 7. Bhutan: Land of the Thunder Dragon



*Blue Whistling Thrush*

Bhutan is a Himalayan kingdom mainly known as the Land of Thunder Dragon. Bhutan was isolated from most of the world until the 1960s, when developmental efforts brought in telephones, schools, hospitals and a national currency. The remote and breath-taking Kingdom of Bhutan first opened its borders to tourists in 1974, however still it is one of the less-visited places on Earth. Travelling to this largely untouched place is an adventure all in itself.



*Happiness is the development philosophy of Bhutan*

In this amazing country nature and peace both reign supreme. The great Himalayan range covered with green forests and obviously capped with snow is the mighty presence in Bhutan. Throughout the seasons, Bhutan is a photographer's paradise. A paradise in the heart of Himalayas. I decided to set out with family and friends in the mountains of Bhutan to shoot out the natural beauty of it.



*Bhutan is not less than heaven for any photographer*



We first toured the Phuentsholing, which is a small town of Bhutan, situated on the border touching India. On the Indian side, Jaigaon is the last town. After crossing the gate, you will find Phuentsholing to welcome you to Bhutan. Phuentsholing serves as the convenient entry/exit point for Bhutan and also the important link to West Bengal, Sikkim and Assam. Our purpose to stay here was mainly to get entry permit for onward journey in Bhutan. For visiting Bhutan, you do not need any visa if you are Indian. Your Indian passport or voter card will serve the purpose. It took almost half day to complete all formalities. Then we visited a beautiful monastery situated in the city.



*Archery is national game of Bhutan*

Once finished the formalities in Phuentsholing, it was time to move on and see more of Bhutan. We then proceeded to Paro, one of the most beautiful of Bhutan's valleys. We stayed in a Hotel near the river Paro Chu (Chu means River). Taking advantage of it, I took a walk in the early morning, with camera, alongside the river. Temperature was about 1°C, it was hard to hold and operate them camera, but I managed to click some landscapes. Above it in a rocky outcrop of the sleepy hillside stands the Paro Dzong (Monastery cum fort).





*Barking Deer*

Afterwards we took the opportunity to drive to the Chele La Pass, the highest road pass in Bhutan at the height of 4000m. Despite the altitude we enjoyed a beautiful clear, warm and still visit to the pass. Made all the more mysterious and beautiful with its abundance of prayer flags—some for good luck, some for the memory of relatives. To top it off, the mountain and valley vistas were breath-taking.



*Chele La Pass welcomes you with chilly rain, strong winds and fluttering prayer flags.*



*Beautiful view of Himalayan peaks from Chele La pass*

En-route, we encountered yak-herder huts and grazing yaks. Further, we drove down to the picturesque Ha valley, a very small and cold town, where bridges, green hills and charming river were awaiting our cameras. In the evening we went back to Paro.



*Yak grazing grass on way from Ha Valley to Chele La pass*



Punakha was our next stop. Punakha Valley is a beautiful area, with its rice terraces and backdrop of Himalaya Mountains. This route of Punakha provides a great experience of a Bhutanese rural life. Punakha and Wangdu are located in the same valley. We had a short walk to see the people planting rice and it was a great opportunity to take pictures.



*Paddy fields on rural trek of Punakha*

The valley is fed by the Pho Chhu and the Mo Chhu rivers. Here we took opportunity to experience white water river rafting on the current of these rivers.





*White Water Rafting over Pho Chhu river is an amazing experience*

During the meticulously organised river rafting trip, we journeyed through the most scenic and secluded miles featuring breath-taking alpine scenery, sighting world's rarest birds and amazing rapids on the backdrop of striking 17th Century Punkha Dzong. We loved seeing the architecture and the Buddhist monks walking through the courtyards.



*Picturesque view of Punakha River*



*Punakha Dzong is the most impressive Dzong of Bhutan*

After exploring Punakha, we left for Thimpu, the capital city of Bhutan. When you think Thimpu, you visualise dazzling hues of monasteries, Buddhist souvenirs, and scarlet chillies, women clad in striking traditional attires and more. The presence of spirituality in the air blends well with the Buddhist traditions, and fills the atmosphere with serenity. The cultural focus remains on maintaining traditions in every aspect of life here. We roamed around in local market, City square is a great place to visit. We also visited the Buddha in Thimpu, it was a short 20 min ride uphill. You get a nice aerial view of the city.





*A little monk at Thimpu*

We also visited Zoo, Botanical Park and Trashi Chhoe Dzong. One of the highlights for us was touring Dochu La pass. At Dochu La is a very photogenic monument of 108 chortens packed together densely in a green surrounding. You will never be tired of photographing this monument from all possible angles.



*A medicinal plant*



Next day we travelled back to Phuentsholing. The way from Thimpu to Phuentsholing was very beautiful and we passed numerous majestic waterfalls on the way. On way at a local village we were lucky enough to watch the popular mask dance of Bhutan as a part of local festival. Mask dance is an integral part of the Bhutan's remarkable cultural and religious traditions. I had good opportunity to capture this sacred traditional dance of Bhutan in my camera and I did not miss it.



*Magical mask dance of Bhutan*

We stayed for a night in Phuentsholing before leaving Bhutan. That evening we were sad and glad, sad because it was our last day in Bhutan and glad that we did this trip. With heavy hearts, aching muscles, and a tonne of memories in mind as well captured in cameras, it was time to leave Bhutan. We crossed the border in next morning. We were greeted with heavy vehicle horn sounds as soon as stepping inside Jaigaon. My transformative experience continued till my last step here, as I relied upon the kindness of strangers to get me back to India.



*Spotted Nut Cracker*

Going to Bhutan was amazing, it was a physical and mental challenge, and experience that was so rewarding. It really was a life changing experience for me and the place that tickle my mind really came to life.



*Green-backed Tit*



## 8. Roaring Ranthambore



*The majestic tiger*

Located at the border of Thar Desert, Ranthambore is known as the best place to be visited because it not only offers eye catchy sightseeing, but also is the home of tigers. Surrounded by Vindhya Hills and Aravali Hills, Ranthambore is the prime destination because it offers the treasure of mysterious desert which really amazes by its environment.





*Painted Spurrow*

I visited the Ranthambore National Park along with my family at the mid of July, when the summer is at its peak in Rajasthan. The visit was purposely scheduled at this time, because in this pre-monsoon period the trees lose their leaves, grass disappears and so the wild animals become more visible. Not only that, due to reduced water sources and grass in core area of jungle, the herbivores are compelled to move into outer side area of forest in search of food and water, followed by the predators including Tigers. So this period is golden period for wildlife photographers. I too decided to take this opportunity to quench my thirst for wildlife photography.



*Plum-headed Parakeet*

We were there for two and half days and took 3 safaris. First day since we missed the noon safari time we preferred to visit the Fort and the Ganesha Temple situated on the hilly area of jungle. The view of the Jungle from the top of the Ranthambore Fort was truly captivating. On a way we were able to see many crocodiles gathered around a small water hole. However, it was not allowed to get down from the vehicle to take photographs of the crocodiles.

Next morning we were picked up by our Guide who came with Canter. The seats of the Canter were so close together it was difficult to sit straight and our knees rub on rivets down the seat back. We choose trail 2 and were, of course, told we have a good chance of a tiger. But we spend the morning looking at spotted deer, sambar and a few birds including Spotted Owlets.





*Chittals*

After an hour we had seen very little, there were no waterholes as yet and we were all covered in a thick layer of dust. We stop briefly for the guide to explain the medicinal properties. We were disappointed, since during this safari we were not only failed to see this majestic mammal but even we could not find any other wild creatures to make us excited. To make us ease our guide told us jungle safari is all about game of chance.

Our evening safari was far different; the small open top Canter picked us up at 3.30 and then continued to pick up people for the next thirty minutes or so from the different hotels and resorts. I still remember that as soon as we entered the jungle on our first safari in Zone 4, one of our co-tourist, who was a foreigner, shouted pointing out his finger towards grass field in left side of our Canter, "There is a Tigerrrrr."

We looked there astonishingly and frighteningly. We saw a tigress coming towards us carelessly and then she disappeared in the bushes. But fortunately after few minutes she came out again when we were about to move ahead.

This time she was with us for almost 30 minutes when she gracefully walked on the forest trail.

It was wonderful driving almost parallel to her and at one point of time we were facing her directly when she came out of the bushes and moved head on towards our Safari Vehicle.

It was my first experience to click this majestic mammal from such proximity. It was really a thrilling experience.

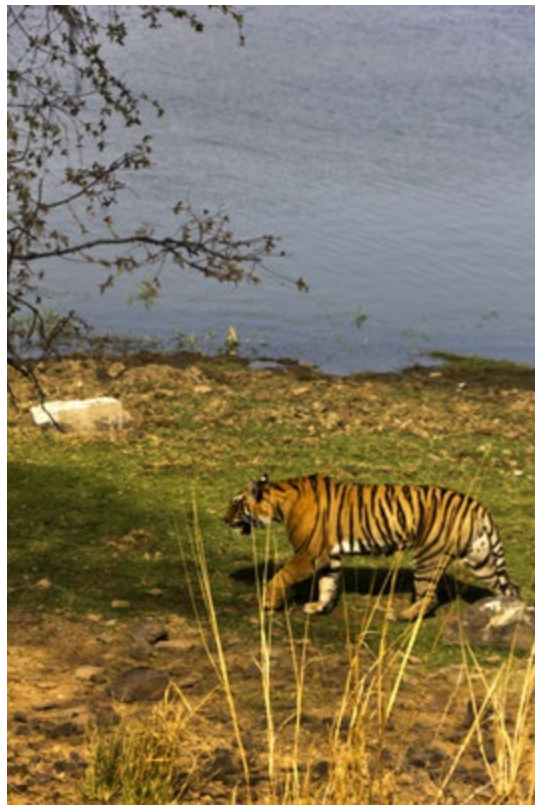


But the real drama was yet to begin. The cat walk ended at the Malik Lake in the forest, where numbers of Sambar deer were gazing. She stopped and camouflaged herself in tall grass. My heart beat was going up and up due to excitement. There were many other safari vehicles with us. All vehicles were queued up in front of the lake.



*Chasing the tiger in jeeps*

In our right side, at the end of lake, tigress had taken position for hunt and in our left side, at the other end of lake, the innocent deer were grazing in their mood.



*Spotting the tiger near Malik Lake*

There was a pin drop silence. I was in confusion as to whether I should use zoom lens of 500 mm or 200 mm lens, because it was the time when I had just started trying my hand on wildlife photography. I was not having much time. I decided to use 200mm lens, because our Canter was between the prey and predator, and the tigress was likely to be passed from front side of our vehicle.



*Moved to hunt*



All of sudden, the silent broke. One of the deer gave an alarm call and all the deer were on alert mode.



*Sambar Deer on alert*

Now the real thrilling moment came. The tigress started running towards the sambars.



*Moved to hunt*



At one point she almost jumped over our vehicle.



*The tigress very near our jeep*

When the tiger jumped and passed from front side of our vehical, I realised what a powerful animal it is and at the same time I also felt that how helpless we would be if he attack us.



*The tigress on the hunt for sambhar deer*



I felt tingling sensation passing through my body while watching and capturing the sensational event.



*The tigress on the hunt for sambhar deer*

The Sambars too started running to save their lives, but within moments the tigress was able to reach there.



*The tigress near the sambhar deer*



A small deer fell down by a blow of paw of the tigress. But that baby-deer was lucky. The tigress, may be due to small size of that infant, neglected it and focused on other big deer, but the game was now turned the baby deer got time to get up and run away and the big deer was also successful to escape in the meantime.



*The sambhar deer escape from the tigress*

Finally, the queen was failed to hunt, but I was happy to witness those breath-taking moments in the wilderness and successful to capture moments in my camera. Then the tigress decided to rest near the lake and we too decided to return back to our hotel as our safari time was going to be over.



*A group of Wild Boars in the lake*

In evening safari our excitement was not over yet. This time we choose trail 6 and were told we had a good chance of a tiger. After heading straight for few minutes we were stopped by another jeep who informed us there were tigers on the way to right.

Eventually, on reaching there we spot tigers through a gap in the trees on downside of the trail, some jeeps and vehicles were already there. Our driver adjusted our vehicle as close as possible. I zoomed through my lens. To our pleasure a tiger and a tigress were lazing near a waterhole few feet down to our vehicle. We came to know actually they were mating after frequent intervals.

Those were rare moments for any wildlife photographer and it was a matter of sheer luck for amateur photographer like me, but due to peculiar angle and obstruction of trees and plantation between tigers and us, it was difficult to focus and to take good photographs. We stopped our vehicle there and decided to wait for right moment. Some more safari vehicles also arrived there. There prevailed silence except the noise of shutter sound of the cameras.





*Tiger looking straight into the camera*

But the silence was broken with the simultaneous roar of both tigers as process of mating. It was really a terrible moment. With vibes of roar two tigers not only our vehicles shook for a while but it trembled our hearts too. We hanged there for more than 30 minutes expecting the better shot but situation remained the same. So we left place and took round of the remaining part of our root and then went back to our resort.

Next morning we started our return journey to home with cherishable memories and an experience for lifetime.



*Tiger taking a walk after a mud-bath*



## 9. Velvety Velavadar



*A blackbuck leaps for life*

During winter season early on the Saturday morning, armed with cameras, I set out with my family to visit the Velavadar Blackbuck National Park, the homeland of majestic Indian antelope, which is situated 140 km away from my hometown Ahmedabad and 65 km north of Bhavnagar, in the Bhal region of Saurashtra, Gujarat.



*Green Bee Eater*

Velavadar is the only tropical grassland in India having the status of National Park.



*Hoopu*

The park is set between two rivers, and surrounded by salty wastelands affected by overflowing seawater from the high tidal zone of the Gulf of Khambhat in the southern border and agricultural fields on the northern side.





*Crested Lark*

The Velavadar National park has area of dense Savannah type grasslands and thorn scrub.



*Baya Weavers*

The grassland turns golden yellow in the winter.



*Rufous Tailed Lark*



*Common Kestrel*

The principal attraction of park is massive population of a special kind of antelopes of Indian origin, known as blackbucks (*Antelope cervicapra rajputnae*). These antelopes are locally known as 'Kaliyar' or 'Kala Hiran'.





*Blackbuck on the run*

In this park, the tall, dry, and golden savannah grass blowing in the wind looks like golden sea and the herds of blackbucks seems gleaming and glistening like velvet in the sunlight. Driving through the Velavadar National Park gives an impression like a trip through the African savannas with similar landscapes populated with numbers of antelopes.



*Merging with the grass*

The dynamic beauty of vast, endless, and open grassland merging with blue horizons and often interspersed with the elegant antelopes has a magical effect on the visitors. This grassland is certainly a true destination of wildlifers and photographers. I was amazed viewing hundreds of blackbucks near my car from very close range on the open flat grassland.



*Vision in the gold*

The Blackbuck is an exclusively Indian animal, which is fastest of the Indian antelopes and is perhaps the most graceful and beautiful of its kind. The male antelope bear large, long spiraling horns and colored in deep black, whereas the female is light brown in colour and usually hornless.





*Magnificent male blackbuck*

It has been described as an amazing piece of nature's splendid art in graphic contrasts because the upper parts of the animal's body are black and the under parts and a ring around the eyes are white.



*A male blackbuck leaps high above the grass*

In this grassland, one has sure chance of watching the lovely blackbucks in their natural mood, running, feeding, fighting and jumping high in the air over the level of grass announcing its presence.



*Blackbucks fight for dominance*

Though the unique grassland of Velavadar is solely named for the blackbucks, a wide variety of other species like Indian Wolves, Blue Bulls (Nilgais), Jackals, Jungle Cats, Hare etc. lives here too, which can be seen often while touring the park.



*Blue bull (Nilgai)*



Velavadar is also a significant habitat for the Indian Wolf, where the Indian Wolf is proliferating successfully.

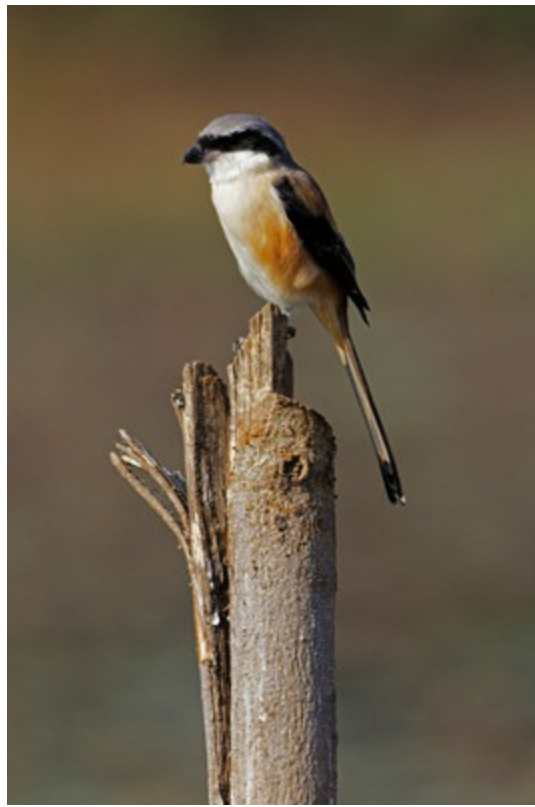


*Nilgai on alert mode*

The Velevadar Park is rich in bird life as well.



*Indian Roler*



*Long Tailed Shrike*

The climate in Velavadar makes it one of the best places for migrating birds to breed.



*White Storks*

Velavadar is an excellent place to see a large number of birds like Bustard, Cranes, White Pelican etc.





*Siberian Stone Chat*

We were lucky to see a number of White Pelicans, but they were in no mood to give us pose for photograph. As we started walking on the flat land towards them, they started flying away. Finally, we decided not to disturb them.



*Painted Stork with kill in wetland*

This lovely little sanctuary is a wonderful place full of natural beauty, which leaves a magical effect on the visitors.



*White Cheeked Bulbul*

The beauty of wild nature and majestic blackbucks remains forever etched in my mind compelling to visits its wonders again and again.



*Blackbucks in action*





# 10. Andaman: The Emerald Island



*The sea and sky together changing colours gradually in the emerald island of Andaman.*

During my trip with my family and friends. I felt that we also need not to make costly trip of Hawaii or Tahiti like places in order to enjoy the charisma of mother nature. The Andamans are blessed with clear blue seawater, coral reefs, rich marine life, high mountains, lush green rain-forests, mangroves, long coast line and gleaming white sandy beaches. Here one can enjoy the solitude of virgin nature. These are the ideal of beauty and present a landscape full with scenic and picturesque extravaganza.

These islands shimmer like emeralds in the Bay of Bengal that's why they are often called 'Emerald Isles'. The name Andaman was presumed to be derived from Hanuman, who was known to the Malays as Handuman. The Andamans were shrouded in mystery for centuries because of their inaccessibility, but now it's a developing land, with people being cultured and literate and it is a tourist hub.

Not only the beauty of nature and the various enticing features but also the peace loving people have made the Andaman a tourist spot for various visitors overseas. We began our journey from Port Blair, which is a beautiful town and Capital of Andaman and Nicobar, having numbers of museums, markets, wide roads, new buildings, hotels, schools, clinics, water sports complex and the cellular jail. If you find any person started speaking in Hindi, who had not talked in Hindi during the two hours long journey by air from the Chennai Airport in the Airbus you have traveled, you can imagine that you are landed at air port of Port Blair.



The people in the Islands speak Hindi language mainly. In these islands people of all religions and of all regions like Bengali, Malayali, Tamil, Telugu, Pujabi, Nicobar etc., live together in complete peace and harmony and there is no political or communal riots or atrocities. This is rare sight that one finds in India which is unusual as there are constraints, communal riots and calmless situation on account of languages, regions etc. in the other parts of India. I also came to know inter-religion and inter-regional marriages are common in these Islands. This amazing racial and cultural mix can be correctly described as Mini-India.

When we landed in **Port Blair**, the weather was splendid. The tropical climate and taste of salt in the air added to the charms of the islands. In Port Blair rain is unpredictable. One more special feature of this Island is that though the clocks are running as per the Indian time, geographically there is time difference of about one and half hour. In the Port Blair, people go to their work place at around 8 am and returns back to home at around 4 pm.

The **Ross Island** is situated very close to Port Blair and accessible by boat (15 minutes journey). This Island was the capital of the islands during the British regime, which stands now as a ruin of the bygone days with old structures almost in debris.



*Scenic view of Ross Island*

At the evening time, we attended ‘Light & Sound Show’ inside the **Cellular Jail**, located in the Port Blair, wherein the saga of the heroic freedom struggle is brought alive. It gives a grim reminder of horrific barbarism practiced by the Britishers, on the freedom fighters like Veer Savarkar and others, who had just asked for freedom from British rule. Many of freedom fighters brought to this Jail from the mainland never seen again. They either died there because of limitless torture or as a result of excessively hard labour or were hanged with or without, court sentences. They had to peel number of coconuts in a day and take out oil from them. Any lapse or incapability in work by the prisoners was

followed by barbaric punishments. Torture Cells, hard labour camps and gallows are still can be seen there today. I understood why the Emerald Island gained nickname of 'Kaala Paani' in the pages of History.

As I read somewhere, Japanese soldiers also committed atrocities on inhabitants of this islands and on the prisoners, when they captured the Andaman, during the world war two, which equal to those carried out by the Nazis.

We visited nearby **Viper Island**, as I came to know from our guide, is connected with heroic story of Sher Ali Khan, the brave Pathan, who murdered Lord Mayo, Viceroy of India with a knife, who later on condemned to death and was hanged in gallows of this Island.

The next place we visited is **Havelock Island**, which is a part of Greater Nilcobar. Its about 21 nautical miles away from Port Blair and takes about 5 hours by boat from Port Blair harbour. Havelock is one of 36 inhabited islands in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which consists total 572 islands. To reach at the Havelock Island we boarded a small ship ferrying passengers between Port Blair and this island.

The ship ride spanned about five hours and was a very lively experience. We stood on the deck of the ship and watched the endless dark blue sea, thrilled to spot a few dolphins and other sea creatures. This island is rich of corals and marine life and also provides an idyllic location in the lap of virgin beaches and an unpolluted environment.

The sheer blue water of sea, white shining sand, sky sprinkled with the light blue colour and the gigantic trees stretched right up to the shoreline, altogether provides picturesque frames to this beautiful virgin beach.





*The gleaming white sandy Havelock beach.*

We were unprepared for the thrilling and adventures visit of enchanting Island of **Baratang**, which was an experience of a life time for me. Baratang Island is around 110 KMs far from Port Blair by road, followed by a short ferry ride and another half-an-hour ride on a speedboat. The roadways for Baratang Island is passing through an evergreen dense jungle, were we had been face to face with aborigines known as '**Jarawas**'.

On entering the jungle our guide strictly instructed us to not use the camera for photography or videography, as it is strictly prohibited here. One another reason was that the Jarawas react aggressively when the cameras are flashed on them. From the windows of our bus we were able to see the Jarawas with their bows and arrows, going about their job for hunting of wild animals. They looked physically fit, appearing to be healthy, with black smooth skin, deep curly hair, long sturdy hands and legs and sturdy bones. The Jarawas are isolated so long and they do not have the taste of civilized world as they live in their own natural habitat.

As I am told the Jarawa Tribes eat wild boar, turtles and their eggs, crabs, wild pigs, fruits and honey. While passing through the jungle, there was pin drop silence in our bus, because the Jarawas were not appearing so friendly. However at some places they were found to be requesting through sign language, for food and water, however, it is legally not allowed to offer food or any other compliments to them. One policeman with gun remains in the bus from starting point to the end of jungle.



*A handicraft made out of coconut showing face of Jarawa girl.*

The real enchanting world awaited us after the end of jungle, followed by a short ferry ride and another half-an-hour tour ride on a “speedboat”. As the speedboat made its way through the waters of the Baratang Creek, tiny islands and endless stretches of massive tropical forests bordered by mangrove swamp were viewed on either side. After that, we entered into a mangrove canopy water area and the speedboat made its way through beautiful creek full of mangroves. We were instructed to take care of our head and other body parts from the branches of mangroves.

When the boatman took the boat in to a tiny jetty (Nayadera Creek), a narrow bridge made of bamboo, winding its way through thick mangroves appeared. We got off the bridge and started walking after removing our shoes because the way was totally muddy. The path was leading to the famous **limestone Caves of Baratang**.

On moving ahead we found the trek was becoming increasingly narrow and hard to walk. It was very difficult to walk on slippery and uneven muddy way. A number of water leeches jumped on us. It started raining heavily, which made our journey more difficult and challenging. After walking over a kilometer the path ended in a narrow, dark and massive cave with no sunlight and constant dripping of water from the ceiling. Our boatman-cum-guide brought a powerful torchlight with him, but it could not light up the entire cave. The cave was a sight to behold, which gives immense sense of adventure to the tourist.





*In the creek of Baratang Island, tiny islands and endless stretches of massive tropical forests bordered by mangrove swamp can be viewed on either side.*

We returned back to boat to see another awesome sight on Baratang Island; it's a **mud-volcano** situated about 10 kms from Baratang. The journey to hillock having mud volcano involves trekking for around 40 minutes. Here instead of lava, grey coloured thick mud oozes out and spills over the edge, it grows in size and forms a miniature volcano.

Every so often, a thick bubble formed where the mud oozed out and sometimes there was a sulphurous smell can be noted. The sulphur gas and heat generated by this volcano has effected the flora of this sight. This volcano is active throughout the year. This is a rare phenomenon and is found in only selected places around the globe. In our country, Andamans is the only place where such volcanoes are found. The active Mud Volcano is terrific sight for tourists.



*A view of hillock of active Mud Volcano and its effects on the nereby plantation.*

Finally, we came to end of our journey which was a pleasant experience full of thrill, excitement and adventure. It was really a great experience and pleasure to visit Andaman. I really enjoyed the experience and will cherish the moments spent there.



# 11. My Paintings



*Red Indian*

“When all the trees have been cut down, when all the animals have been hunted, when all the waters are polluted, when all the air is unsafe to breathe, only then will you discover you cannot eat money.” — *Cree Prophecy*



*A Snow Owl*

“The owl is the wisest of all birds because the more it sees the less it talks.” — *Christie Watson*



*Tiger*

“A tiger does not shout its tigritude, it acts.” — *Wole Soyinka*



## 12. The Last Lions

What is not unusual about India is the unusual! India is only country in the world which holds the unique distinction of having the existence of two big carnivores, the lion and tiger, since the prehistoric epoch. Both noble animals, both part of royalty, the lion adorns the national emblem of India; the other, the Royal Bengal Tiger, is the national animal of the country. However, India's lions are lesser known than its famed tigers which live on dozens of tiger reserves and are fighting a well-publicized battle against poachers. Even many Indians are surprised to hear that wild lions live in their country, but for me it is the lions of Gir that hold a special meaning.



*A pensive male lion*

The Gir forest in Gujarat is the last refuge of the Asiatic lions found in the wilderness. Centuries ago, thousands of Asiatic lions roamed across Syria, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and India. They were hunted to the brink of extinction. Today more than 400 wild Asiatic lions are believed to be left on the earth. Gir forest is their last and only natural habitat. Conservation efforts here were first spearheaded by the Nawab of Junagadh, and the nature preserve's official founding in 1965 gave the lions freedom to roam. Beholding the Asiatic Lions in person is a rare and wonderful experience. Thanks to conservation efforts, these majestic lions are now roaming freely in their kingdom.



*A mother lion preparing her cub to rule over the jungle.*

Gir is the next best place after Africa to see these lions. Smaller than their African cousins but no less majestic, these ferocious, stunning Asiatic lions live alongside humans in their last home. This last abode of the Asiatic lions is the place where these majestic cats can be photographed in the wild. The lions of Gir have fascinated me since childhood. I remember a photo of nine lions drinking water together from a pond in Gir forest, on the 3rd or 4th standard Gujarat subject book cover page, which was taken by the famous wildlife photographer of Gujarat, Shri Suleman Patel, who won many national and international awards for the said photograph. These days, with high chances of sighting, Gir provides great opportunities for photographing lions and understanding their behaviour. Sasan-Gir is heaven for every nature lover or wildlife photographer who harbours a desire to see a “free living, wild lion in India”.





*A majestic lioness, queen of Sasan-Gir, stares straight into the camera.*

This dangerous but beautiful beast has forever engrossed me to capture its perilous beauty in my camera. Since last many years, I frequently visit its magnificent abode, almost once in a year, to take chance to capture in my camera this most majestic, graceful and captivating predator. It is like going on a pilgrimage to nature. Fortunately I am living only 340 kms (approx.) away from Sasan-Gir, in Ahmedabad, so visiting once in a year this royal kingdom of the Asiatic lions is not a big deal. The reward is undoubtedly priceless. Nothing can quite take the place of sighting and photographing these big cats.



*The prides in Gir rarely consist of more than a few lions.*



*Two lionesses live happily together in the pride.*





*Two lionesses in a lighter moment.*

During my frequent trips of this land of lions, I have seen these powerful cats in their various moods and expressions, and I am fortunate to capture some of moments in my camera. Going close to the king of the jungle and to witness such intimate moments in their lives is really mesmerizing and exhilarating experience in life. There's nothing that awakens a sense of awe quite like the proud stance and flowing mane of a lion. With its handsome mane, the male big cat is one of the most impressive animal figures to have inspired art and to have remained as a symbol of majesty for ages. The female, however, takes away her share of adoration for being the primary hunter.





*The royal queen of the jungle.*



*A lion queen on the move.*

On almost every continent and culture, the lion can be found demonstrating man's fascination with this magnificent beast. Guarding our temples, adorning our flags, decorating our coins and capturing our hearts, the lion is beyond doubt the world's most iconic species. For centuries, lions have been



rooted in our hearts and minds as symbols of beauty, strength and bravery — but against the forces of humanity, they're undeniably fragile.



*A lioness on alert mode.*



*A lioness watches every movement for the security of her cub.*





*A mother lion leads her cubs to a safer place.*



*A cub who will hopefully become king of the jungle one day and form a pride of his own.*

In these days, the tranquil forest and dirt roads of Gir are disrupted by the loud, gas-guzzling jeeps used by tourists to ride around in. In the mad rush to get a sighting, the jeeps pile up at the spots where the big cats are, with tourists gawking and being anything but respectful towards the animals. This intrusion has made these animals accustomed, by force, to human proximity and vehicle sounds.



In spite of discomfort of the dirty and uneven roads and rush of vehicles, when you come within leaping distance of a lioness lounging among the tree or a big male with a windswept mane, you forget about this nuisance. Your heart will surely skip a beat with the tremendous excitement of watching the majestic lion suddenly popping out from the bushes. It is wonderful to watch an animal behaving in a natural way despite our presence.



*A lion peeking out from behind a tree.*

The sighting of a lion in Gir is, of course, a matter of chance. It depends upon your luck and whether the King grants you the privilege of seeing him or not. I made many trips to Gir having no luck in sighting a lion. However, for me, taking a safari through the thick forest is always a joy, even without the added excitement of spotting lions. The jungle is full of other wildlife and myriad bird species, which I love to capture in my camera too, as it is part of my obsession for wildlife photography. To have a fantastic safari experience at Gir, the privilege of a jeep safari with the assistance of an expert guide is beneficial to fulfil the wildlife fantasies. I prefer to have an experienced guide with me during jungle safari. I remember the expert and experienced guide Shri Tazubhai, who made me fortunate to see and photograph around 20 lions, in various moods, in two day's trip. At one point, Tazubhai, drew us to a small river in the forest stating that there is probability of coming of a pride of lions to drink water at river at 6 pm, and surprisingly sharp at the 6 pm it happened so. Unfortunately, Shri Tazubhai is now no more in this world to manage a sure appointment with the king.



*The oppressive heat of Gir drove these three lionesses and their cubs to the water's edge, as seen in the last rays of the day.*

Going close to any lion in an open jeep to take photos is always a challenging endeavour. It was a nerve-wracking experience for me to capture on camera the duo Ram and Shyam, the famous pair of lions that ruled over Gir forest in recent years. The gang of two was a terrible coalition, protecting their territory together. Both were big ones and ferocious. As per forest officials Ram was described as "beautiful" and "flamboyant" and was a most photographed lion. Ram had a visible distinguished mark on his head with very impressive mane. That day, we were just to finish our evening safari, our guide after interacting with a tracker told us that the said famous lion brothers are nearby. On reaching there we found that ours was an only tourist vehicle present near the two dangerous lions. Shyam was sleeping at distance and Ram was resting with his head up, just few feet away from our vehicle. He was gazing towards my camera, probably with expression of displeasure. Looking to his mood, our guide advised that we should move back from there as soon as possible and I had no reason to disagreeing with him, though I managed a few photographs of the real king of beasts before moving from there. It was a life time experience for me. Later, it was in the news that Ram had died, as every kingdom must come to an end. Shyam is getting on in years.





*Ram, the powerful lion who ruled over Gir forest for years together with Shyam.*

Despite the lions' symbolic importance in our life throughout the ages, today they are suffering from a silent extinction across India. These amazing creatures are victim of habitat loss and degradation as well as human conflict. Without immediate action, we may one day live in a world where the lions would be seen in photographs only. To lose the lion from our land would be to lose part of our national heritage.